

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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by Brett Halliday

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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DEATH TAKES A PILGRIMAGE

by Brett Halliday

It was a situation straight out of a mystery novel, but Mike Shayne knew this wasn't fiction, it was reality, and he was right in the middle of it, with death lurking everywhere! 4

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LISENCE TO UNZ.ORG

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It was strange, Shayne thought, how impersonal killing had become. Nowadays a woman could kill by applying less pressure on a trigger than she did on a perfume spray!

Death Takes A Pilgrimage

by BRETT HALLIDAY

LIKE A WOUNDED HERON, ITS WINGS FLAILING IN DESPERATION, the bikini-clad blonde waved her arms helplessly in mid-air just before the inevitable crash. The sapphire water parted with a flat slap. After momentarily disappearing she bobbed to the surface, her lungs gasping for air and words, her arms windmilling in the water.

The milling bodies that surrounded the pool were preoccupied with fruit-salad drinks and happy-faced conversation. At 40 watts a channel a duet belted out "Close to You." As the blonde disappeared beneath the water, a Hawaiian-shirted fat man struggled to the bar and exclaimed for all to hear, "Wake up, you zombies. I didn't fly halfway across this country to attend a funeral."

The white-skinned bodies paid him no more attention than they did the drowning blonde.

At that moment a tall redhead stepped onto the patio. Her arm entwined in his, a black-haired woman carrying a beach bag paused to kiss him on the cheek as they approached a man in yellow beachwear.

"Honey," she said, "I want you to meet our host, Harrison Bailey. He's the old friend I've been telling you about." She kissed the stocky man on the cheek. "Harry, this is my husband, Mike."

Just as he extended his hand, the big redhead's eye caught the refraction of trouble from the pool dead ahead. Without a word he took three long steps and launched himself into the air.

The redhead found her right below a plastic raft. Panic and tiredness showed in her eyes. He grasped her under the arms and pushed off the pool bottom. Breaking the surface he spotted the trio he had just left kneeling over the edge.

As they hauled the lifeless blonde up, the rescuer pulled himself out of the pool. Quickly he pressed on her chest to began to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The man in the yellow outfit comforted the blackhaired woman. "Oh, Sheila, what a horrible way to start your honeymoon."

The drunk staggered up, took one look at the redhead's efforts, and said, "Now there's a man who knows how to party."

AN EXHAUSTED SHAYNE SAT ON THE ORNATE STONE BALUSTRADE around the huge pool that was littered with sea grape leaves. The Florida sun had grown hotter. Even the fat man was subdued. The blackhaired woman massaged the redhead's tired arms. A man in a blue terrycloth robe was hunched over the motionless blonde.

"Cummings is the best neurosurgeon in the world," his companion said softly to the redhead. "If anybody can help poor Martha, it's our renowned Dr. Taft."

The doctor stood up and walked toward the group. "I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head, "our dear Prioress is gone on the final pilgrimage."

"To think she drowned in my pool," said Bailey.

"And none of us saw her," said Sheila.

"She didn't drown," Taft said.

Shayne's ears perked up. "What do you mean?"

"Now I don't have my lab equipment with me, mind you, but Martha's symptoms, especially the color of her lips, suggest poisoning."

"Oh, my God," exclaimed a thin man smoking a pipe. He began to tremble. "Just before she jumped in the pool, Martha asked me to watch this." He held up a glass that was shaped like a hollow pineapple.

Dr. Taft bent over the glass and began to sniff. He touched a finger to the glass, then his lips. "Arsenic, I'd say."

"You mean," said the pipe-smoker, "somebody deliberately poisoned Martha?"

Shayne caught the pineapple as it slipped from the man's trembling

fingers. "I think we'd better call the police."

Harrison Bailey stepped forward. "I'm afraid that will be impossible. You see, my major domo informed me just before he left that our radio has malfunctioned."

"Well," said Sheila, "someone can ride the launch to the mainland and bring back the sheriff."

"That, too, is impossible," said Bailey. "When I dismissed the last of the servants for our get-together, they took the boat. I fear we're cut off from the outside world until they return in two days—unless anybody wishes to swim the five miles to the mainland."

"From the looks of the untrimmed shrubbery and palms," said Shayne to the woman, "the servants might as well have left last month."

"This is beginning to sound like something out of an Agatha Christie novel," said the fat man. "A body, an isolated island, a group of friends who hate each other's guts."

"Come on, Robbins," said Taft. "Don't make anything sinister out of this."

"That's right," said Bailey. "With the help gone until Sunday, we've had to fend for ourselves. In fact, just half an hour ago Martha asked me where she could find some sugar to concoct an exotic drink. We have a pest problem on the island and keep all sorts of poisons and pesticides at hand. With her money Martha hasn't had to enter a kitchen for years. Wouldn't it be just like our prim and proper Prioress to mistake the poison in an unlabelled container for sugar."

"Harrison's right," said a frail figure in a designer warm-up suit. Sweeping his thinning blond hair off his forehead, the man said, "If we didn't love one another so much, why would we travel from Timbuctoo every other year to be in each other's company?"

"I agree with Bruno," said a distinguished man in a white linen suit. "We've been friends for many years. Let's not let an unfortunate accident split us apart."

"You're right, Basil," interjected a voice.

"Just look at poor Sheila," said Bailey. "She's on her fourth—or is it fifth honeymoon, and we're trying to deck her in black."

"Come on, dear," said Shayne to the darkhaired Sheila. "Let's go back to the room and . . . rest."

Robbins laughed out loud, his fat body quivering. "I said it once and I'll say it again. There's a man who knows how to party."

SHAYNE LOOKED AT THE DUST-COVERED CANOPIED BED. It was a far cry from the antique in his hotel-apartment.

"Well," said Sheila, "you want to try it out?"

Shayne stared her right in the eye. "No offense, but that wasn't part of my services."

She tittered nervously. "For a mere \$500 a day, I'd think you'd try to pick up all the perks possible."

Shayne fired up a Camel. "Business is business and pleasure is pleasure. If you mix the two, you know what that makes you."

"When dear Katherine recommended you, she said one of your unredeemable faults was your scrupulous honesty. Now tell me, is this any way to get our marriage off on the right foot?"

Shayne shook his head. In Sheila Martin's polo party world the come-on was as common as the five o'clock martini. He hadn't really wanted to take this case, but when things were slow, \$500 a day for a three-day weekend was hard to pass up. Especially when all he had to do was babysit.

She opened the black leather case that had been in her beach bag. Sitting on red velvet was a jewel-encrusted cross. "Isn't it exquisite?" she purred.

Shayne studied the relic. He could never understand why something as basic as religion had to be dressed up with gold, stained glass, and precious stones.

"It's already started," she said, "just as I feared when I hired you. *Ma petite* Martha. How ironic that she, always so concerned with her appearance, that she should have died with such a ghastly pallor on her face. I must make a mental note to have the undertaker arrange her hair to feature that aristocratic forehead she was always flaunting."

"Lady," said the detective, blowing out a cloud of smoke, "you'll have to learn to contain your grief."

"Speaks his mind too, Katherine warned," she said almost to herself.

"I can see why you hired me," he admitted. "There's more congeniality at a PLO-Israeli mixer."

"You've got to realize, Shayne, that all the people in the Tabard Inn Society are rich and powerful. They're used to having their own way."

"You didn't tell me too much about your friends when you hired me to watch over that little doodad of yours."

She bristled. "The Croix de Rouen is hardly a doodad. I paid more for it at a Sotheby's auction than you'll make in a lifetime."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" He stubbed out his cigarette in a metal bowl. "Tell me about this group."

"The Tabard Inn Society is a secret organization named after the tavern where the pilgrims gathered in *The Canterbury Tales*. You do

know Geoffrey Chaucer?"

"Not personally, but." Flashing through Shayne's mind was a memory of one of the good times. Once while waiting for Susan, the ex-prostitute he had helped start a new life at Florida American University, he had thumbed through her textbooks. *The Canterbury Tales* had caught his eye. Chaucer knew people, and there was a down-to-earth quality and a humor about him.

"Well, like contemporary pilgrims," she said, "we journey every other year to our shrine here on Canterbury Island. Harrison Bailey started the club four years ago. We meet in even years and have a banquet. Last time Harrison started a small contest. Each of us tried to find the very best Medieval treasure we could acquire."

"Who are these people?

"The dirty dozen?" She laughed. "All very prominent and very rich, dedicated to the mystique of Medieval Europe. Once every other year we take a weekend off and just disappear. Not even our family, our closest friends know where we are. That's the fun of it. Cummings—Dr. Taft—as I said earlier, is the neurologist. Perhaps you read how he just operated on that OPEC oil minister. At what they're charging, I hope it was a frontal lobotomy. Harrison, who had the vision to fashion this Medieval mansion we are ensconced in, has money so old nobody knows where it came from. Dexter Robbins, that tub of lard, on the other hand, has new money. Surely you've seen those Robbins' nests, as he calls them, those dreadful little tract houses, all over? They're more of them than those horrible McDonald's."

Shayne was certain her nose actually turned up.

"The frail man in the warm-up suit is Bruno Kinsky. Descends from the Rothschilds. We initiated the Pardonner at our last meeting."

"Hold it. You just said Pardonner, and earlier someone called the blonde the Prioress."

"How observant, but then you are the detective. As part of our initiation ceremony, when someone joins us, we give him or her the name of one of Chaucer's pilgrims. Of course we try to match the initiate with the appropriate character. Martha, for instance, was so caught up with appearances she just had to be Chaucer's Prioress. Cummings, because of his profession, is the gold-loving physician. And me? You're my fifth husband." She put her hand on his right knee. "I'm the . . ."

"Wife of Bath."

"You are acquainted with Chaucer."

Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door. "Let's go, lovers," urged a loud Robbins. "You've already cast your shaft, and now it's

time for some archery."

His bawdy laughter rolled down the armor-lined hallway long after he had left.

THEY WERE STANDING ON A SLIGHT RISE IN THE MIDDLE of the island. Above a gleam from the thick brush near the island's dock, Shayne could just make out the lower west coast of the peninsula on the distant north horizon. To the south the Medieval mansion with its long parapets and brightly colored guerdons stretched along the shore line and back into time. The redhead couldn't help but think how out of place a fortress from the Middle Ages looked amidst the palm trees and yucca.

"You know, Sheila," said a man Shayne thought he recognized, "I am still mad at you."

"How could you be, Carlo?" she chided. "Didn't your authentic Richard Coeur de Lion mace take first place from me last time?"

"Not that, my child," said the figure in the tan safari jacket. "For marrying. I thought you whispered to me last meeting that when you divorced your third—or was it fourth—I would have first chance."

"You were too busy in Hollywood with that series of yours," she said coyly. "What is its name now? *The Love Island*? No. *The Fantasy Ship*?"

"I believe you mock a noble profession, my pet. Now please, introduce me to this redhaired stranger beside you. He looks handsome enough to be a leading man."

"Carlo, this is my husband, Michael Shayne. Mike, this is Carlo Conti. He makes a living doing, heaven forbid, television."

Shayne recognized the tall, grayhaired man as the star of one of the shows Lucy liked to watch on Saturday evenings. He shook the actor's hand and said hello.

"Getting rather chummy with our group slut, aren't you, Carlo?" The voice belonged to a ruddy-completed man in jeans and a polo shirt.

"Being a congressman in our nation's capital, Jerry, you probably know a lot about prostitution," returned Conti.

"You know what I mean," said the politician. "When we joined the Tabard Inn Society, we voted to keep this an elite group. Sheila is the first of us to bring an outsider in."

"That's right, Jerry," answered Conti. "All you had to do was what I did—ask for a dispensation if you wanted to bring your favorite wife, or pageboy."

Harrison Bailey stepped between the two men immediately.

"Speaking of dispensations, has anybody seen Monsignor Casell? I know he was the last to arrive."

"He told me he was going to go exploring," said Bruno Kinsky, selecting a bow from a nearby rack.

"How like our Yeoman. Ever the huntsman," said the man in the white linen suit.

"Well, since he's not here to demonstrate his legendary bowmanship," said a heavy-set man in white shorts and a blue shirt, "why don't I give the archery exhibition?"

"Why, Mark," said Sheila, "if you're as good with a bow as you are with a boat, we're in dreadful trouble. I think we all remember how you let us down last summer."

"That's right, Mark old buddy," said Dexter Robbins. "You allowed those damned Kangaroo lovers to take the Americas Cup down under."

"Some sailor, Cusslar," said the frail man with the pipe still unlit.

"Listen, you wimps," answered Mark Cusslar, "had I been selected to defend our national honor, I'd have taken the wind out of those Aussies' sails." He handed Shayne a fiberglass bow. "Why don't we do our guest the honor of letting him shoot first." He pointed toward the beach where a target had been painted on a sheet that was hung between two palms. "Show us what you can do, old man."

Shayne took the bow, selected the straightest arrow he could find from the nearby quiver, and knocked the shaft. He couldn't remember the last time he had fired one, but it was just like shooting his Smith & Wesson. Slowly he drew back the string, then exhaled even more slowly. The tension in the bow must have been well over a hundred pounds, he decided. Cusslar was trying to embarrass him by giving him too much pull.

Why not? decided Shayne. He pulled back farther and kept pulling. His sinewy arm strained as did the six-foot weapon. Back even still farther.

Suddenly there was a cracking, and the bow snapped in Shayne's hand. He stood there holding the two halves. "Don't make these things like they used to," he said.

Soon everybody was shooting. Sheila was the most surprising. She had arms the size of stork legs, and the redhead marvelled at how she drew back, breathed deeply, and fired. Within minutes they had used up the supply of arrows, and putting their weapons down, the group started forward to collect their shafts.

Bruno Kinsky, the first to arrive at the target, kept going. He disappeared behind the sheet, then reappeared like a wraith.

"What is it?" said Bailey.

Kinsky drew back the torn white target as though it had been a stage curtain.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I've found our Yeoman."

Lying in a chaise longue, his face to the sun and his back to the target, was a figure in the uniform of the church. Shayne noticed something else about him quickly. His back looked like a pin cushion where over a half-dozen arrows had stuck.

Sheila screamed.

Miles Grogran dropped the pipe from his mouth.

"Not another accident," said Bailey.

"Not another accident," said Shayne. He pointed at the man's wrists, which had been attached to the lawn chair with wire. On the ground was a handkerchief. The redhead took a quick whiff. "Chloroform," he announced.

"The bloody bloke was murdered," said Sir Basil Niven, the man in the white linen suit.

"Right now," said the big detective, "it doesn't look as though he was the first."

OUTSIDE, THE TROPICAL APRIL TEMPERATURE HAD CLIMB-
well into the 70's, which was hot for a late spring afternoon. Inside, the eleven figures huddled beside a fire in the main hall. They were all cold.

"I think we ought to call off this year's contest," said Miles Grogran, lighting his pipe with a straw from the fireplace.

"We can't be sure that's why we're being killed," said Cusslar.

"Why else?" said Bailey.

"What bothers me is that I thought we were all friends," said Sheila. "It's difficult for me to believe that one of us—one of you is killing us off."

Sir Basil Niven stood up and placed his arm around Sheila's shoulder. "I think we need to stay with each other. If we're always together, the killer won't dare strike."

The fat man, Dexter Robbins, spoke up. "I can't get over the monsignor. His body was so scarred, so viciously abused. Good God, things this violent don't happen in an Agatha Christie novel."

Shayne shook his head at the mentality of the super rich. Their money insulated them from people, from feeling, from reality. One minute they were cutting each other to the quick—the next they were patting each other on the back while they said "friend." Ironically they seemed to believe they cared about each other. But the thing that bothered the redhead the most was how they regarded the unwanted

stranger—death. Unable to cope with his cold finality, they were forced to relate to him through the fantasy world of an English storyteller.

What should he think, Shayne told himself, about a group whose idea of fun was this Jet Set Olympics, where their only exercise was the flexing of their wallets—and egos.

Sheila shifted her position on the couch. Her breasts, covered only by a white cashmere sweater, pressed into Shayne. "You heard what the man said," she whispered. "Let's stay close."

Adding sex to his list of the ways they could relate, Shayne started to get up.

"What are the others going to think about the newlyweds?" she purred.

The big detective said, "Frankly, my dear—" before she put a finger to his lips. Shayne accepted it. He had a job to do.

Her right hand, in full view of the disinterested spectators, began to massage his right thigh while her left pointed between his legs. "You know how valuable that is."

The redhead looked down at the leather case. He was a babysitter for the moment, not a detective trying to figure out who was doing it, but the best way to protect Sheila and her treasure might be to find the killer. In other circumstances he would have picked up and left, but that was impossible now.

Bruno Kinsky stood up in his gray warmup suit. "I can't take this love and fellowship, this *Brudermensch*. It's smothering me. I think we'll all be safe if we stay in the house. I'm going for a tour."

Jerry Benedict raised his heavy-set frame and in his deep, midwestern accent said, "Wait up, Bruno. I'll keep you company."

"I'll just bet he will," said Robbins with a gutteral snicker as the group watched the congressman drape his meaty arm over Kinsky's frail shoulders.

"The Summoner and the Pardonner," said Sheila. "Together again. How very Chaucerian." She turned to Shayne. "In *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer hinted that the Pardonner was a little less than a man."

"Bruno sings a nice soprano to Jerry's basso profundo," said Taft matter of factly.

Bailey laughed. "Do you remember Bruno's face at the initiation ceremony the last time we met?"

Robbins slapped his side. "Yeah, Herr Kinsky was so sure he was going to be nicknamed the Manciple."

"You should talk, Dexter," said Cusslar. "You were certain you were going to be the wealthy and influential Reeve."

Robbins' face grew suddenly red. "I don't have to take this from you

hogturds. I'm leaving." He went storming out, the flames in the fireplace reflected in his eyes.

One by one the group wandered out of the great room. The afternoon sun, which had dropped lower, now set the stained glass windows ablaze. The two of them alone, the redhead lifted a battle axe from the wall. It impressed him how strong a man had to be in those bygone times just to wield a weapon, how mano a mano death had been. Nowadays killing had become so impersonal. Even a woman could kill by applying less pressure on a trigger than she did on a perfume spray.

Shayne felt Sheila Martin's light touch on his bare arm.

"Thanks for putting up with me," she said, tilting her head and hiding behind the strands of dark hair. "When I'm scared, I say and do a lot of stupid things, and right now I'm more frightened than I was after my first divorce."

Shayne nodded and slipped his arm over her shoulders. He could feel a slight tremor in her body.

From the distance they heard a crash that echoed toward them, growing louder as it came.

"What was that?" somebody yelled.

"The library," Bailey cried out from the distance.

Taking Sheila in one hand and the box in the other, Shayne followed the crowd down the hallway. When they walked into the room, they spotted the mess. Glass, books, objets d'art, and wood sprawled across the floor.

"My books," Bailey said. "It's a good thing I have my priceless editions put away."

"To hell with your editions, Harrison," said Taft. "Look."

Like a flesh-colored snake crushed as it emerged from its hole, a thin arm lay stretched from a pile of books. In the motionless fist was a broken pipe.

No sooner had the words "our Clerk" escaped from several lips than Bruno Kinsky's voice accelerated their fear.

"The Trophy Room. Hurry."

The group ran down a hallway, turned right, and burst into a room filled with Medieval weapons. Kinsky was standing in the archway without moving. Everything seemed in place except for a solitary suit of armor. Its helmet had come off and rolled to the side.

Shayne didn't have to study the scene carefully. The sleeve from a white jacket protruded from the armor. Inside the helmet was a human head that had been severed from its body.

Nobody had to tell the detective that Sir Basil Niven's nickname had

been the Knight.

A GIANT BOAR'S HEAD SAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TABLE with potatoes in the mouth and fruit where the eyes had once been. Surrounding the centerpiece were plates of vegetables, stuffing, fruits, and tankards of wine.

"Nice try, Harrison," said Dexter Robbins, his stomach still unattracted to the meal. "You run a mean microwave."

"Perhaps I owe you people a confession." Nobody seemed to be listening, but the host continued anyway. "I was such an avid collector of Thirteen Century artifacts, too obsessed with the past to pay attention to my beautiful wife. Her doctor told me she withered up and died from my neglect. In effect, I killed her. Canterbury island was built as my shrine to her and what she stood for. It was meant to be my atonement, and now it's became a common graveyard."

Cummings Taft looked up from his untouched meal. "Perhaps we are all guilty, Harrison. We not only take advantage of you, but we also spend all year taking advantage of every customer, every person we know just so we can accumulate enough money to win some inane contest."

"Well put, doctor," said Bruno Kinsky, still in his sweat suit. "The whole premise of our group is a bit ludicrous, a bit juvenile."

"Perhaps we can all atone," said Sheila, her face still puffed up from crying.

"How?" said Cusslar.

Shayne handed her the box. She opened it. "I too have false pretenses. As much as I would like him to be, this man is not my husband. His name is Michael Shayne, and he is the best private investigator Miami has to offer."

The remaining seven looked at Shayne and began to mumble to each other.

"Had I not brought an outsider into this group, perhaps none of this would have happened," she confessed. Opening the box, she removed the Croix de Rouen and placed it at the middle of the table beside the stuffed centerpiece. "I would like to donate this cross to any charity the Tabard Inn Society selects, and I would like to serve as the first of many gifts from all of us."

Shayne studied the effects of fear and guilt. He watched the eight of them coming together, trying desperately not to think about the one flaw in their expiation—*one of them was a cold-blooded killer!* And that person had to be flushed out, then flushed down the drain permanently. To hell with the babysitting now that it was all in the

open. Four people had died, and their lives cried out for vindication, for justice.

Yeah, there was no doubt about it. One of them had already cut himself out of atonement.

"That's a good idea, Sheila," said a contrite Cusslar. "Only I left my treasure hidden upstairs."

"In the absence of a bodyguard," said Carlo Conti, "I too secreted my artifact in my room."

Shayne took charge. Standing amidst the shaking pilgrims, the redhead said, "Go get your offerings. I've got an idea on how we can end this whole mess, now."

AT THE FOOT OF THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE WINDING UP to the guest rooms stood the big redhead. Beside him was a huge fountain where water spurted from a unicorn's horn. After a quick jog to the beach, he had just had time to tell Sheila his plan when he heard the wood above him crack.

They looked up to see Mark Cusslar hurtling downward toward them. The shipman's terrified scream and flailing body were abruptly halted by the footlong bronze horn.

Sheila buried her face in the redhead's chest so she wouldn't have to look at the spouting water tinged with crimson.

Above them six heads peered over the railing.

"Not again," said Bailey.

"My God," said Robbins, "when will it stop?" Unable to hold the bile down any longer, he vomited over the edge.

"I thought you were going to put an end to all this," said Kinsky to the redhead.

"I will," said Shayne, "just as soon as you get your ass down here."

FIVE CHAIRS SAT CONSPICUOUSLY EMPTY. THE SURVIVORS all had some sort of container in front of them. They were nervously chattering.

Suddenly Shayne pounded the butt of his .38 on the table. "O.K., people, we've played your games long enough. It's time to journey back to the Twentieth Century."

"How do you propose to discover which of us is the killer?" said Jerry Benedict nervously.

"A little game of my own," said the tall redhead. "It was invented a century ago by the Russians. But, before I get started, would anyone like to admit to the killings?"

They all stared incredulously.

"This is stupid," said Kinsky, getting up.

"Sit down, pal," said Shayne sharply.

"Do you really think somebody who's cold-bloodedly killed five people is suddenly going to admit it?" said Bailey.

"Well, Mr. Hotshot Detective," said Robbins, "what are you going to do to make us talk?"

"Simple," Shayne pulled back the hammer of the Smith & Wesson. "I've got six bullets, and there are seven of you. I'm going to shoot you one at a time until the killer confesses. Wouldn't it be ironic if I wasted six innocents and didn't have a bullet left for the killer?"

"You're bluffing," said Sheila. "Nobody, not even some shady eye from Miami, just shoots people."

Shayne pointed the .38 at her and squeezed.

The darkhaired women clutched her stomach and pitched forward.

"Wonder what Agatha Christie would say about that?" said the big detective sarcastically.

"This is insane," said Taft.

"Barbaric," added Conti.

"But effective," said Shayne. "You know, since nobody knows you're here, somebody could just kill you all, take all those priceless artifacts, and sell them for himself—that is, if somebody needed money."

"What are you talking about?" said Benedict, his politician's cool gone.

Shayne continued. "Suppose somebody were broke. Couldn't even afford servants to dust the house and clean off the pool. That somebody could kill you all off, take the boat I just found stashed by the beach, and head for the high life of the mainland."

"You're not implying that I . . ." said Bailey.

"You still don't think I'm serious," said Shayne. He pulled back the hammer again. "You're next, Bailey, so I'll give you one last chance to save your skin."

Robbins blurted out, "For God sakes, Harrison, just show him what's in your box. A man with a priceless artifact wouldn't be so broke he'd have to kill."

"Good point," said Shayne, still pointing his gun. "Bailey, what's inside your box?"

Bailey sat motionless.

Taft, sitting next to him, jerked the box from his hand and opened it up.

It was empty.

In the split-second everyone's eyes shifted to the box, Bailey over-

turned the table toward Shayne. The contents tumbling at him, Shayne tried but couldn't get out of the way.

As the redhead sprawled beneath the food and utensils, the host broke for the doorway.

When he pulled himself to his feet, Shayne saw Bailey had vanished.

"He's headed for the Trophy Room," said Benedict.

Unable to find his gun, Shayne took off in pursuit. He pushed the startled guests aside and bounded down the hallway.

Part way down the narrow passage, the detective slowed. Bailey had extinguished the lights, and scudding clouds obscured the quarter moon. Hesitantly the redhead lit a match. Down the hall he spotted a decorative torch. Two more matches got him there. He tried to light the old torch. Finally it caught. The acrid scent of aged wood was repulsive, but its dim glow cast a path toward where Bailey had disappeared.

Holding the torch to his side, Shayne picked his way down the hallway. Creeping around a corner and into the Trophy Room's doorway, he heard a sound like a tire blowing out. The torch was suddenly torn from his grasp. Metal clanged against the wall.

A crossbow bolt, thought Shayne. He groped for the light switch he remembered seeing on the right wall earlier.

The room was flooded with light. Bailey, caught trying to rewind the crossbow, stopped and threw the weapon at the big detective.

Shayne ducked.

"Too bad you had to figure out my little plan," said Bailey. "That flock of idiots wouldn't have. They played right into my hands. Who would have missed such a gaggle of geese? They were just like my dear departed wife, Allyson."

"Did you kill her, too?" said Shayne, staring across the room at his opponent.

"Yes, but not until too late. By then she had already spent all my money collecting young men and debts."

"So you came up with a little plan to have the merry band of pilgrims do your collecting for you."

"Why not? With their egos I knew they would acquire some of the world's great medieval treasures to impress each other."

"Then you would have them isolated on the island with nobody knowing where they were. You could kill them off one by one till there were none."

"How perceptive," said Bailey, opening a glass trophy case and withdrawing a mace and chain. "And did you catch the poetic justice in their deaths? Each one died in a manner appropriate to their Canterbury namesake."

Shayne yanked a shield from the wall.

"Our dear Prioress, so careful with her dining etiquette, died from my arsenic in her goblet. And the Monsignor Casell, the Yeoman so proud of his archery prowess, got the shaft one might say." Bailey laughed as he swung the mace above his head.

Shayne raised the shield. The spiked ball glanced off the polished metal with a reverberating clang. Before Bailey could wind up again, Shayne hurled the dented shield like a giant Frisbee. It caught the host in the midsection, driving him backward.

"Pretty good for a novice warrior," said Bailey regaining his feet. He jerked a pike from the wall. "A grisly instrument this."

"So's this," said the redhead, grabbing a two-handed broadsword. Noticing the others gathered at the doorway, Shayne growled, "Get out of here. This is no polo match."

Stepping past the still-open Iron Maiden, Bailey laughed. "I had this beauty reserved for the Wife of Bath, but you beat me to it. That revolver of yours is efficient, but it's too impersonal, too mechanical. No, these, these are men's weapons."

He lunged at Shayne.

The redhead parried with the sword. It was heavier than he had thought and slowed his reactions.

Metal against metal rang like a death knell. Bailey snapped the pike staff around, catching Shayne in the ribs.

The redhead tumbled into the wall, his breath momentarily escaping his lungs.

The pike's point came swiftly toward the detective's face.

Shayne twisted.

The pike drove deeply into the oaken wall.

Shayne swung the broadsword around, snapping the pike shaft just below the head.

Bailey jabbed the short stake at Shayne's heart.

Again the redhead parried the blow. Finishing the motion, he rammed the hilt up into Bailey's chin.

Bone cracked.

The host screamed. His words came out garbled between spurts of blood.

Suddenly berserk, Bailey grabbed a morning star and began swinging it like Death with his scythe.

Shayne kept ducking and retreating, backing his way around the room. One eye searched for a weapon while the other watched his maddened antagonist.

Nothing he could use to attack or to protect himself.

The redhead stooped to avoid a low-hanging flag pole. Then he paused.

Bailey swung the morning star.

Shayne, so close one of the weapon's edges tore his polo shirt, waited till the exact second it passed by him.

He leapt up, grabbed the pole, and swung both feet forward.

Too late, Bailey tried to use the morning star.

Shayne's feet caught him dead in the sternum, staggering him, knocking him backward.

Bailey screamed like a dying cat.

The Iron Maiden had caught him in her piercing, metallic embrace.

THE MORNING SUN TURNED THE WATER GOLD AS SHAYNE helped the survivors aboard the tiny launch.

"Let's go," urged the redhead. "The sooner we talk to the sheriff, the sooner we can all get on with our lives."

Congressman Jerry Benedict shook the big detective's hand. "And we can all thank you for having lives to get on with."

Robbins said, "I don't know which was worse on my heart—seeing Harrison pincushioned in that horrible torture device or watching Sheila walk into the Trophy Room afterwards."

Shayne smiled wryly as he helped the darkhaired woman aboard. "I'm sorry I had to play one more game. A lot of circumstantial evidence pointed to Bailey, but I had to do something dramatic to get him to tip his hand. I suspected him from the beginning. He got you all here, and he was the only one who knew his way around well enough to sneak up on his victims all over the place."

"For me," said Taft, "the worse part was having to spend last night in a house with six corpses."

"It could have been worse," said Kinsky.

"Yeah," said Shayne, "you could have been one of the corpses."

"There's one more thing," said Benedict. "Shayne, we've talked it over. Sheila had a great idea last night about our artifacts. After all this mess is cleared up with the authorities, we'd like to set up a trust—maybe call it the Canterbury Fund—and, well, we'd like you to decide which charity will benefit from the proceeds."

Shayne fired up the motor and headed the launch away from the island. Maybe there was some atonement at the end of their pilgrimage after all.



The tomb hadn't been opened in one hundred fifty years—and yet apparently someone had come out of it and committed murder. Senator Banner didn't believe in vampires, but that seemed like the only explanation!

The Grand Guignol Caper

by JOSEPH COMMINGS

GUY ST. HILAIRE HAD WON HIS PLACE OF HONOR through violence. And he looked the part too. Slouching against the antimacassared sofa at the far end of the red room, the smouldering stub of a Gauloise blue dangling from one side of his mouth, he had the thin cat-face of Robespierre. He was dressed in a ratcatcher tweed jacket, a black turtleneck sweater underneath, and a tweed cap pulled aggressively over one of his yellowy-green eyes. All he needed was a red kerchief around his throat to make him look like an apache. The only thing out of place in this desperado character was the chalk-dust on his sleeves. The jealousy and hate in his cat's eyes was as quick and consuming as a flash fire.

Colonel Walter Seven—Division of Criminal Investigation of the United States Army—stood facing St. Hilaire. Long and lean in his decorated uniform, his own brown bony face sober, he held a blue communication in his hand.

“This *pneumatique* just arrived.” Seven glanced down at the blue

message he held. "A high-ranking official will be here later on today with the medal."

Reluctantly, St. Hilaire took the stub of cigarette from his lips. "Colonel," he said, "it means nothing to me. Just leave us alone."

"It's taken a special Act of Congress to give you this Medal of Honor," reminded Seven coldly.

St. Hilaire sneered. "With that medal and a *carnet* I can ride in the metro."

"You'll take it," said Seven steadily, "if I have to cram it down your throat."

The red room was full of the damp cold of a Paris winter. A different sort of chill was creeping in. They were in the outskirts of Paris, in an old chateau converted into a children's school—*Ecole des Enfants*. It had taken a long time for the United States Government to sift the rumors that had come out of the days of the Occupation, rumors of what a certain Guy St. Hilaire had done for his own France, and later what he had done for the Americans, making the way a little easier for the entrance of General Leclerc's armored division into Paris on the Day of Liberation. Colonel Seven had been given the job of running St. Hilaire down, and two days ago Seven had finally located the long-obscure fighter of the *Forces Francaises de l'Interieur*, locating him here, in the oldest house of all crazy and picturesque, with an unevenly flagged courtyard against the chateau wall.

Always solitary, St. Hilaire had withdrawn into an academic shell. War decorations, to him, were a dime a dozen.

Now the hero of the Resistance swaggered forward, catlike, the old soldier and the old athlete apparent in all his movements.

"You care no more for the medal than I do." St. Hilaire spoke precise English—for he was a schoolteacher—with no hint of any phony French accent. "You have remained in the school for two days. Why have you not left?" Jealousy consumed him. "It is Lucienne!"

A third voice in the room, a gentler voice, said: "There is enough room for all of us, Guy."

Lucienne Gallon was crouching by the big fireplace, shivering. The cold was penetrating, but it was apprehension, Seven knew, that made her shiver. She was tearing an old magazine into strips to start a fire.

Lucienne and St. Hilaire were running the boarding school together. There were rooms enough, in this great pile of grey stone, and beds enough for the thirty-two pupils, and anyone else who cared to stay.

St. Hilaire ignored her remark. He glowered at Seven with a whammy eye. "Go home, American!"

Seven could get just as hot. He glowered right back. "I'll go when I

damn well please!"

"Colonel!" Lucienne's little scream had the effect of a referee momentarily parting two antagonists. Her voice came down to a lower pitch. "Have you a match? Please help me start a fire. Please."

Seven thrust out his bony jaw at St. Hilaire, then turned away and strode to her. He fumbled for a match and struck it up. It flared, and as he bent over the grate he eyed her. He couldn't deny that St. Hilaire was right. It was Lucienne's Gallic brunette looks, her too-dark eyes and her too-pale face with her wide mouth and pale lips, that was keeping him at the *Ecole des Enfants*. She really wasn't even pretty, but she was chockful of *je ne sais quoi*, which is just using extra words to say sex appeal.

The paper in the grate took flame and Lucienne bent beside him to tend it, her shoulder secretly brushing his. Seven's pirate senses stirred. You don't have to be a Frenchman to go for something like this.

A moment later he stood erect to resume his duel of eyes with St. Hilaire.

St. Hilaire was watching them, coldly malevolent.

"Another thing, St. Hilaire," said Seven, trying to keep his voice steady. "Lucienne's tried to cover up those bruises on her arms and shoulders. But I've seen them."

"Please," she cried in anguish, straightening again by the fire, "don't trouble yourself on my account, colonel."

Seven looked deadly. St. Hilaire's violence touched other things when his jealousy became uncontrolled. "If you hit her like that again—"

"What will you do?" taunted St. Hilaire.

Careful, Seven. This man is dangerous.

"It is only on rare occasions," said Lucienne miserably, straining to keep peace between them. "He hit me only with his hands and fists. Nothing else. I bruise easily."

"What will you do?" repeated St. Hilaire with relish.

"I'll make you regret it," warned Seven.

"Zut!" spat out St. Hilaire. He made it sound like an evil curse. "You come in and try to steal my girl and then you threaten me. Be careful, colonel. I have killed Germans—but we'll talk no more of that. With one blow of my open hand across your larynx I can fracture your thyroid cartilage." He brought his bent arm up at shoulder level as if to backhand Seven across the Adam's apple. "And you are finished!"

"I think I'm a match for you any day, St. Hilaire," said Seven with a coolness he didn't feel.

"You're an imbecile!"

"Always have been," said Seven with sudden wry humor. "But even that side of me appeals to the gals."

He smiled at Lucienne. He caught her off guard. She smiled back.

St. Hilaire's sallow face turned a muddy white. He could take anything but her smiling at Seven. His body jerked, then his arm darted out to slap Seven in the face.

Seven, his head turned partly away, saw the blow coming from the corner of his eye. He ducked, yet caught the tail-end of the stinging slap across the cheek.

Seven cursed honestly. He set himself to slug back, to mess up the features of that damned jiggling Frenchman.

"I will wear the Congressional Medal of Honor!" cried St. Hilaire derisively. "You are obliged to salute me!"

"I'll salute you—after I knock your block off!"

Lucienne caught his arm. "No, no! It is not worth fighting about!"

Angry, Seven started to yank free. There is no telling what would have been the outcome then, only there was a scurry of feet in the hall outside and the door slammed open and a boy's voice yelled out: "The bloodthirsty vampire in the cemetery!"

"Pierre Cricq!" said Lucienne. "What is this?"

Pierre Cricq stumbled in among them. He was about eleven years old, and dark, with a curiously plump face on a spindly body.

He was nervously abrupt. "Raoul Pax! The vampire has strangled him in the cemetery! I saw it all!"

"Pax? Where is he?"

"Still there, Mademoiselle Gallon!"

"We must go at once," cried Lucienne. Horrible as the implications of this interruption were, it was almost as if she were flooded with relief at the stopping of certain bloodshed between Seven and St. Hilaire. She started out.

Seven's fists were still knotted up, his furious mind barely on what the boy was trying to tell them. "We'll finish this later, St. Hilaire."

Seven turned on his heel and followed Lucienne and Cricq out the door.

OUTSIDE, THE SNOW WAS, IN CERTAIN PLACES, WET AND deep. They all stopped long enough to put on overcoats and overshoes before running out into the cobbled Rue de la Nuit, following closely the scudding feet of little Pierre Cricq.

The old burying-ground of St. Felix of Valois was only a hundred yards up the deserted street. Cricq finally stopped at the iron gate in the ruined wall, waiting for the three adults to catch up with him. They

arrived, blowing breath in clouds of steam. An iron bell rang dismally when they pushed open the door, as if to warn the dead of the approach of the living.

Everything in the snow-covered place lay in rank disorder. Cracked sarcophagi and fallen monuments were everywhere; old slate headstones, green and black and broken, toppled funery urns, crumbled cenotaphs. It struck Seven then, as he had good reason to remember later, that it looked like the ideal setting for a horror film.

Cricq pointed in toward the center of the cemetery. "There is Raoul Pax!"

Seven ran forward. There was the sodden heap of a boy lying in a patch of well-trampled snow. Seven looked around, then cautioned the others: "Stay back! Don't walk on the footprints!"

While the others held back, Seven made certain that Pax was dead. He had been strangled by a pair of hands at the throat. Dr. Thibaud confirmed that later.

The footprints and other marks in the snow told the story clearly enough without Cricq's thin piping commentary, sounding like a fife obbligato to this grotesquerie.

Cricq with two other schoolboys, Raoul Pax and Achille Simplon, were out that morning for a lark. They had gone into the cemetery through one of the two gates, the east gate. Their riotous footprints, Seven could see, showed where they had come from the gate toward the center of the graveyard, horsing and pegging snowballs at one another.

This skelter of marks ended in the scramble where Raoul Pax now lay crumpled in death.

"He," said Cricq, his wiry body jumping with nerves, "he—the vampire—came up behind us from the tombstones. He seized Raoul. We stood in terror for a moment before we could think of moving."

"What'd the vampire look like?" asked Seven. "Big? Small?"

"He was big. But yes." Cricq's big eyes were staring out of his plump face. "He was wrapped around in a cloak. Or a sheet. Yes, it was more like a sheet."

"What about the face?"

"The face—it was horifique. There was no face. And he had iron teeth."

It didn't make sense.

"After the vampire got hold of Raoul and threw him on the ground," continued Cricq, "our legs were able to move. Me, I ran out of the cemetery. Achille did too."

The two pairs of small tracks were there in the snow, leading away

oward the opposite gate, the west gate, the exit nearer the *Ecole des Enfants*, clearly fast-running tracks.

When he was questioned later, Achille Simplon backed up everything that Cricq said.

The footprints of the monster were there too, leading to the place of murder and away from it. They were the tracks of big shoes, cross-ridged, as if they were made of corrugated iron too. The sets of these tracks walked almost parallel to each other, one set coming from the mausoleum and the other going back to it. These particular tracks were seen nowhere else in the graveyard.

The vampire had simply walked from the mausoleum and back to it again.

Midway of the graveyard, under a gnarled bleak tree, stood a tomb that for long years was utterly neglected.

Carefully avoiding stepping on the tracks, Seven walked around the mausoleum. It was dedicated to a *Duc de Gotha*, whose name was hammered out in the stone above the iron doorway. There was only one door. The footprints led to this. Seven tried to open it. It was locked and rusted shut. There was a small plate of thick glass set low in the door. Seven peered through. In the blackness inside he thought he could see the outlines of a coffin supported on a catafalque. He was not sure. The day was leaded with clouds and threw practically no light inside.

He turned to the others, with their pale staring faces.

Cricq was missing.

"Where's the boy?" said Seven sharply.

"I told him to get the police," said Lucienne.

IT WAS OVER AN HOUR LATER.

The police had come, headed by Inspector Frederic Figouroux of the *Brigade Criminelle*. He had listened to the story and had gone away again with a plasticine impression of the mausoleum lock so that he could have a key made.

He gave no indication of what he thought might be lurking in there.

Now he came back, walking slowly, a little dark man wearing a frock coat with a magpie tail, a wool scarf about his scrawny neck, a soiled white waistcoat bulging over his pot, and a black hat. He glanced silently at his lieutenants and the gendarmes patrolling the gravestones. Almost all the children from the school were there now, drawn by morbid curiosity and standing back in silent ranks, herded there by Lucienne Gallon, looking distraught in her ratty fur coat.

In his hand Inspector Figouroux held a new-made key with a fat

shank. He walked deliberately toward the tomb.

There was a disturbance at the cemetery's west gate.

An ancient Hispano-Suiza had pulled up. The door of the tonneau flew open and a fat man with the girth of a beached whale billowed out, a tall silk hat riding perilously on his big square head. Finally freed of the tight squeeze of the car door, he drew himself majestically up, taking off the high silk hat, tending it carefully, polishing it with his elbow, before setting it back on his grizzled mane once more. He was wrapped in a vast wraprascal and he looked as dandified as the last of the stagedoor johnnies.

He was squinting around and muttering: " 'Everybody's in the graveyard,' says the li'l tyke on the doorstep. She wasn't kidding. This place is dead. What in hell are they planning to do? Are they thinking of holding the ceremony in *there*? Hey there, old timer! *Polly voo American?*"

He barged in through the door, setting up the iron bell to a great clang. Every head turned. Inspector Figouroux stopped in his tracks.

The fat man plowed forward, holding the high hat down by the brim to keep it from tipping off his head.

"M'sieu?" questioned Inspector Figouroux.

"I'm Senator Banner, y'see? I've come to pin up an old Underground fighter with the Congressional Medal of Honor. The li'l tyke on the doorstep of the school said that everybody's in the cemetery. Thought that first she meant they were all dead 'n' buried. Say! What's—?"

Inspector Figouroux's calm reflective eyes had a strange dawning light in them. "Senator Banner! Even I, merely Inspector Figouroux, am aware that your stature as a statesman—"

"Statesman!" Banner lapped it up like ice cream. "Ah-ha!"

"—is exceeded only by your criminal career!"

"Pipe down! They ain't discovered *everything* about me yet!" Then Banner chuckled.

"I mean," flustered Inspector Figouroux, "you have solved many great crimes. This one should interest you, m'sieu."

"Whazzat?" Banner peered around at the crowd of staring children, the caped gendarmes, the keen-eyed men of the Surete. "What're you doing with that key?"

"I am prepared to open a locked door. It appears that a murdering vampire walked right through it."

"Vampire!" Banner pricked up his ears like an old fire horse hearing the third alarm.

"Yes! It is *esoterique*!"

Seven stalked up from behind. "So *you're* the high-ranking official, Banner."

Banner had stuck a Pittsburgh stogie the size of a chair leg into his mouth. He turned to aim it at Seven. "They don't rank any higher, Seven. Surprised? I heard you were the one they'd sent scouting after Guy St. Hilaire. I wanna meet him. I hear tell he's killed over forty Krauts in hand-to-hand combat."

"You'll meet him," said Seven sourly, still rankling over the scene in the red room with Lucienne. "First, there's this murder."

"You were mixed up in one when I last saw you in Hong Kong too," scowled Banner. "Can't you stay outta trouble?"

"No more than you can," retorted Seven.

As they walked the rest of the way toward the mausoleum, Seven and Inspector Figouroux filled Banner in on the events. By the time they reached the mausoleum door, Banner had a complete grasp of the situation.

Impatiently Inspector Figouroux hefted the new key. "Shall I open the door?"

"Wait a minute!" Banner was looking around at the snow. His ruddy-jowled face was full of dismay. Then, without any warning, he started doing a Russian Kazatckok up and down and around the mausoleum, planting and shuffling his huge rubbered feet everywhere, avoiding only the sinister vampire footprints.

Inspector Figouroux stared in frank astonishment at this rare demonstration of terpsichore that had now turned into a Scottish highland fling.

Seven was thinking that too many locked rooms—or too many *aperitifs*—had finally made Banner as crazy as a bedbug.

At last, blowing and lathered with perspiration like a brewery horse, Banner's flabbergasting exhibition came to a halt.

"If you're through grandstanding, Banner—" said Seven severely.

Banner shot Seven a withering glance that froze the rest of the words in Seven's throat.

"Open the door, Figouroux," said Banner, puffing.

NOW, IN SPITE OF WHAT HORRENDOUS SECRET THIS WAS to reveal, everybody crowded forward to see. St. Hilaire, Lucienne and Cricq and more of the kids closed in behind Inspector Figouroux, Banner, and Seven.

Inspector Figouroux inserted the key in the ancient lock. He tried to turn it. But it was rusted so tight it was almost too much for him. The

lock resisted. As they watched, a hoary spider came out of the keyhole and ran down the side of the iron door to seek refuge in the undisturbed webs that spanned the doorway. Some of the more timid onlookers drew back.

"Lemme—" Banner started to say, reaching out for the key.

"One moment, senator." Inspector Figouroux applied both hands to the turning of the key. The lock screamed and turned over with a metallic spine-chilling crash. There were ghoulish echoes among the tombstones.

"Push," said Banner.

Inspector Figouroux threw his weight on the door. It wouldn't budge. Banner lent his beef from behind. They were all crowded together on the step. The door opened inward, scratching eerily against the stone flooring of the tomb.

Inspector Figouroux was shoved in through the dark opening. Banner's hulk blocked the narrow entrance, cutting off all the light. It was pitch dark inside. Seven was directly behind Banner, trying to peer over his shoulder.

"Light!" cried Inspector Figouroux faintly, choking.

"Get offa me!" Banner was grunting. "Lemme get out a match!"

A match flared up in his big cupped hands. The foul air of the tomb snuffed it out again like a black hood.

"Judas priest!" muttered Banner. "This tomb ain't had air in it since 1800!"

For a full fifteen seconds they were in the dark with whatever else resided in the mausoleum while Banner hunted for his flashlight. It sprang into being, all the faces hovering over it looking ghastly.

Inside, with the light flicking on it, raised off the floor on a marble block, was a single coffin with a heavy wooden lid nailed tightly down. There was just a half-inch thick on the coffin-top, on everything. But something gleamed in the beam of the flashlight.

There were bright new strokes on the coffin-top, showing the burnished surface of the wood underneath.

Banner pushed Inspector Figouroux aside and started to go forward. He had to untangle Cricq from his legs, where the boy clung, his eyes shining bright with excitement.

Looking down, Seven saw that the streaks on the coffin-top spelled out a word. There were large wriggly-drawn letters: VAMPIR.

"Sweet sassafras!" muttered Banner. "That's been written within the last couple hours. The dust hasn't had a chance to settle in those marks yet."

"Written?" said Seven. "How?"

"With somebody's finger! How else?" Banner seemed particularly annoyed at Seven for some reason.

"Poor spelling of vampire," said Seven.

"That's the proper French way," said St. Hilaire's voice from behind.

"How'd anybody get in here?" muttered Banner. "Those cobwebs across the entrance weren't broken and it took two of us to push open this rusted door . . . Waal! The suspense is killing me! *What's in this coffin?*"

It took a claw hammer and a crowbar to pry up the lid and it came away with a vast screeching of yanked nails. Whatever abominable things they had in their imagination, they were no worse than what was finally discovered.

There were yellow bones wrapped in a faded garment, mildewed and grey, a shroud. But the skull was gone. In its place was a metal casque from a suit of armor.

An iron face!

St. Hilaire's voice sounded hollow in the vault. "There is an inscription in the stone outside this tomb that tells us that the Duc de Gotha was one of the aristocrats beheaded by the guillotine during the Revolution. His head was never found. His relatives supplied this casque for the missing head."

Inspector Figouroux ordered the coffin-lid closed again and everybody was shooed outside.

Inspector Figouroux was the last one out. He slammed the heavy door shut with a great effort and turned the key in the rusty lock.

At that moment Seven saw some very odd behavior. Cricq was standing close to the mausoleum. He bent over, scooping his hands close to the snow without picking anything up. As he came straightening up his hands were packing an invisible snowball. Then he performed some voodooistic motions with his arms and body, like a baseball coach making cabalistic signals to a batter.

Voodoo was right!

Although nothing left Cricq's empty hands, there was a sudden whizzing sound and a loud *kerplunk* as a real snowball smacked Banner's precious high silk hat cleanly off his head, sending it flying and tumbling fifteen feet away.

"Pul-eeze!" Banner had the expression of pained martyrdom of a man who fully expects his fate. A high silk hat and a snowball seem inevitably to be mated, if only briefly.

Tragically Banner looked around at all the innocent faces of the kids from the school, standing well out of reach behind him. "If I ever ketch

the wart who did that," he sounded off, "I'll whale the tar outta him!"

Out of their silent ranks came gurgling sounds of suppressed laughter.

Banner trudged forward, stooped with a loud grunt, picked up the maltreated hat, brushed off the surface, and tried to push the dent out of the crown. He put it back on, its battered appearance making him look more rakish than ever.

Solemnly he returned to Inspector Figouroux's side. Seven saw an odd questioning look pass between them. Something else was in doubt. But nobody was sure what it was.

Least of all, Colonel Walter Seven.

BANNER WAS NOT TO BE HURRIED. NEXT HE HAD HIS lunch. Food was sent over from the Hotel Talleyrand on the Champs Elysee, where he was staying, and Lucienne prepared for him a large amount.

The room was a little dark, dimming the red curtains and the arm-chairs of red velvet to a shade of old rose, and against this rubescence the flecks of silvery grey in Seven's jet black hair gleamed. Banner sat at a table set for two, a serviette tucked under his chins like a baby's bib. His high hat and wraprascal were off now. He wore a large dusty frock coat, which made him *sympatico* with Inspector Figouroux, who also wore a frock coat, though many sizes smaller than Banner's tent-like garment. Banner's britches were a baggy elephantine grey.

Seven was pacing about the room, his brow troubled.

"Figouroux," Banner was saying, while gulping down a round dozen oysters, "is a thoroughgoing feller. He's even got a man digging into the past about the Duc de Gotha to see if the Duc had any reason for getting outta his coffin and walking around in his bones and in that iron helmet. Supernatural stuff."

"You don't believe that," said Seven abruptly.

Banner scowled at Seven, scanning him from head to foot. "No sir!" he grunted. "The vampire's as real as you are." Another one of those pointed remarks. He waved at the plate opposite. "You gonna tie on the feedbag?"

Seven sat down for a fragment of time, hardly realized he was eating eggs benedict, then got up and resumed pacing.

Banner was leisurely chewing his fricassee of veal when Lucienne led in Pierre Cricq.

"Yass," said Banner, nodding at Lucienne. "Figouroux's heard all their stories, but I ain't. I wanna rehash 'em. So this's Cricq!" He glowered as if to pin the boy down like a butterfly.

Cricq stood talking, answering Banner's questions, nervously slipping his feet in and out of his shoes, revealing holes in his socks, twisting his hands with a dirty piece of adhesive around one finger, his eyes and his movements darting. His bright eyes in his plump pale face, thought Seven, were like two raisins in a pan of dough. Essentially Cricq told Banner the same story that he had been telling all along.

When Cricq left, his chum-in-arms, Achille Simplon, took his place.

Seven felt more interested in this boy. This was the first time he had really seen him. Simplon was fair-haired and freckled, large and quiet for his age. He spoke only when he was spoken to, and he volunteered nothing.

Banner forked up the braised endives—burnt leaves, as he called them—and said: "So you saw the vampire too, eh?"

"I saw it and ran, monsieur. That is all."

The description was the same, a tall monster groping in a winding-sheet, an iron face, iron teeth.

Dismissed, Simplon ran out, relieved to be gone.

Lucienne returned as Banner was sampling the *gruyere* cheese.

Banner wiped his lips on the serviette and beamed. "Siddown, mam'zelle," he invited with a large aplomb, the kind of sugary treatment he gave fascinating ladies.

She sat down.

Seven stopped pacing and stood and looked and listened. She tried to keep her haunting dark eyes away from Seven, but every once in a while a glance strayed his way.

"Now, *cherry*," beamed Banner, whose attempts at French would make a Frenchman wince, "what sorta boy was this Raoul Pax? Studious?"

"Studious, yes. But he was more inclined to be athletic. Always exercising and learning new ways of defending himself. Boxing and jujitsu and fencing. He could take care of himself very well, senator."

"Any particular reason for *wanting* to defend himself?" asked Banner.

"None, senator. He got along well with everyone. It is just that he wanted to learn, the way boys do."

"Yass. So you had no trouble with him."

"No, senator. He was a good boy." She looked sorrowfully at the damask rug.

"What about Cricq?" said Banner.

"Ah, there *is* a difference!" Her dark eyes came up again. "He is always into mischief. There seems no end to the things he thinks of doing. Here we call him the Terror."

Banner leaned forward, trailing his string tie in the *mousse au chocolat* dessert. "What's he done?"

"All sorts of stunts. He smokes *Celtiques*, though smoking among the children is forbidden. He has put bullfrogs in the classroom desks. He has put luminous paint on the bats in the tower so that they flit around in the dusk like horrid giant glowworms. He has erected a small guillotine in one of the dungeons."

"Luminous bats, eh?" Banner was smacking his lips with childish delight and slurping up frothy whip from his dish. "Dungeons!"

"Yes, senator. During the war they hid away from the Nazis some of the stained glass windows of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in these dungeons. Cricq is always breaking rules and sneaking off to the *cineacs* to watch the *films parlants*—talking pictures. If there is an American horror picture playing there, it acts upon him like a drug. He is addicted to it."

"Reminds me of my own boyhood," mumbled Banner, mostly to himself. "Haaak! What part does Achille Simplon play in all this? He hasn't been able to tell us anything that Cricq hasn't told us."

"That is precisely it," said Lucienne. "Simplon is Cricq's *ame damnée*."

"Whuzzat?"

Seven interrupted. "His stooge. His tool."

Banner nodded. "A poll-parrot. I thought so." He picked up a silver pot. "Care for some *cafe brulot*? Or cognac?"

"No, thank you, senator." She got up. "If that is all, I'll clear away some of these dishes."

"*Tray bone, cherry*," said Banner in lavish French. He watched her carry a tray out. He turned to Seven. "Wassamatter with you, Seven? Ever since I got here you been walking around in a blue funk."

"I've got problems," said Seven uneasily.

"What in the hell problems have you got?" said Banner with the disdain of a great man who thinks that nobody has troubles compared to his own. "I got 'em! Yass, me! Do I or don't I? I can't decide!"

"Decide about what?"

"The election year, dammit! Should I run or shouldn't I? Right now you could be looking at the next president of the United States!"

"Good God!" groaned Seven. The thought of Banner in the White House jolted him out of his own petty complaints.

"Whatzit, pardner?" asked Banner with heavy-handed comradeship. "Her?" He jabbed a thick thumb at the door through which Lucienne had departed.

"Yes. Her. And another man."

"There's always another man hanging around 'em when they look like *that*. She does kinda stick in your craw, doesn't she?" said Banner romantically. "Makes a feller feel almost Byronic. She ain't strickly Miss Universe material, but she's bedeviling—and that's worse! Didja get a load of her in those tight black slacks?"

"Did I!"

"Why do they call 'em slacks? . . . Mademoiselle from Aremen-tienes," said Banner with a windy sigh that rattled all the crockery on the table. He was waxing poetic. "*Mademoiselle's as bright as a jewel. She's learned some things not taught at school!* The last time I was in Paris was in 1917. That's when we were fighting the war. The *Big War*, buster. I was a shavetail then. We were at the Argonne and the Jeries gave us a rousing welcome at St. Mihiel. I've never forgot it. Come to think of it, I never made *first* lieutenant. Army politics, damn 'em! Politics stink!"

"Hooray for that!" said Seven, deadpanning.

"What I was starting to say," said Banner, calming down, "was that Paree ain't the way it was. Paree's changed. There was an old Madame Djiboux who had a bistro on the Rue Croulebarbe and any time of the day or night you could get from her steaks as thick as the Manhattan phone book or duck roasted over grapevine faggots or hotcha post-cards. Who ever hears of apaches any more? Or those high-heeled hustlers with the slit skirts? They're all gone, I tell you . . . Here! For crissake take this cognac and light someplace."

Seven took the cognac and stood by the fireplace and warmed his backside. "Thank heaven," he said, "gals haven't changed. There'll always be a Lucienne."

"Yass," said Banner slyly. "Only watch out for this one. Bedevilling as she is, she's doing a good job with pancake makeup. She's older'n you think."

"What's that crack mean?" asked Seven.

"Skip it . . . Now after almost making an ass of yourself with the footprints in the graveyard—"

"Me?" gulped Seven, choking on the brandy. "An ass of *myself*? You were the one who was doing all the clowning! That Hopi rain-maker's dance was almost as funny as the expression on your face when somebody whacked your topper off with a snowball."

Banner's jowls were grim. His black burr-eyebrows were thunderous. "Clowning you call it! After saving your hide from being thrown into the hoosegow by the police. Lemme tell you, Seven. Figouroux wouldn't take what *I* saw as any laughing matter!"

"What're you talking about, Banner? What'd *you* see?"

"*Your footprints, you numbskull! You were making 'em all over the place!*" Banner paused to let it sink in. "I was dancing around trying to stomp 'em all out. Nobody could mistake 'em. You got the biggest feet in the place, next to mine. The tracks you were leaving—big with cross-ridges in 'em—were exactly like those of the vampire!"

There was a choken-down silence in the red room.

Then Banner's buzzsaw voice droned on: "Either *you're* the vampire, Seven—or the vampire stole your goddam overshoes!"

UPON THAT STIRRING ANNOUNCEMENT, BANNER YANKED the serviette from under his chins and flung it down on the dirty dishes and loped out, saying that he was leaving for a powwow with the *prefect de police*.

That was the way he played it, for effect. Mellerdrammer. Grandstanding.

"Damn his old walrus hide!" muttered Seven.

He sipped his cognac, staring into the fire.

He was not left alone for long.

St. Hilaire sauntered in, his thumbs stuck in his pockets. He looked like an anarchist.

He said: "We have a score to settle, Colonel. This is a good time."

No wasting time, no wasting motion. St. Hilaire was living close to the bitter truth of Existentialism: a moment lost now is a moment lost forever.

"Why not?" Seven swallowed the last of the cognac in a gulp. "How'd you like to have it?" He put down the thick glass and doubled up his fists.

St. Hilaire looked scornfully at the clenched hands. "Fist fighting is vulgar. Why cannot we settle our difference like gentlemen?"

"Since when have you become a gentleman?" retorted Seven savagely.

"I am the one who has been insulted—"

"You're the one who slapped me!" said Seven.

"—so, since I have the choice, I suggest swords."

"Swords!"

St. Hilaire looked elated.

If he thought that Seven's note of surprise was shock, and expected Seven to cringe and back out of the engagement, he was due for a sour disappointment.

Swords had clashed through Seven's way of life ever since his first boyhood thrill at an early screening of *Scaramouche*. He had brought duelling to fine perfection under an Italian fencing master, Pasquali,

and now in the old chateau it seemed like the ideal time and place to have a go at this cutthroat.

"Where're the swords?" said Seven briskly.

The elation slacked on St. Hilaire's cat face.

He didn't answer. He shrugged in true Gallic manner. He went out and down a broad staircase, Seven following.

Below was a large refectory with a few wooden tables and chairs. As athletic instructor, St. Hilaire had often used this room for exercise and gymnastics. There was plenty of space.

On sober thought, this was a damn-fool struggle. But Seven's buccaneer blood was running hot and fast for combat and conquest and the spoils. He'd show this brigand once and for all who was the better man for Lucienne.

St. Hilaire opened the door of a tall armoire. Inside he pawed over dumbbells, ice skates, long-unused baseball equipment, and bicycle pumps, to get out a sinisterly long black box.

"The epee," he said, and opened the box.

An epee was more dangerous than a foil. The epee had a bowl-shaped guard, a stiffer blade, and a sharper point.

Silently Seven selected one, turned his back on St. Hilaire, and walked to one of the tables. He stripped off his Army blouse, laying it on the table, and rolled up his right shirtsleeve to the elbow. He slashed the sword through the air a few times to get the feel of it. It handled nicely.

St. Hilaire was poised and waiting. In his black turtleneck sweater and close-fitting pants, he looked like a fencing master himself.

"The man who draws blood first is the victor," he said in a mechanical voice.

"Agreed," said Seven.

"*En garde!*"

The swords crossed.

A strange silence had settled down over the whole chateau, exaggerating the clash and scrape of the steel blades and the quick soft steps of the duellists on the stone flagging. Even the voices of the children outside had died away.

There was a sharp exchange, swords beating in time. St. Hilaire struck with the venom of a cobra, missed his mark, and left himself open.

Now!

In a low-crouching lunge, Seven sent his point through St. Hilaire's defense, tearing the sleeve of the sweater and raking up the flesh of the forearm.

St. Hilaire flinched back after being stung, his face gone white.
"Touche," said Seven. He lowered his sword.

Then St. Hilaire, his face a mask of cold ferocity, made a murderous stab at him.

Caught off guard, Seven leaped backwards, twisted his heel, tripped, and rolled over and over on the stone floor.

St. Hilaire pursued him like a fury, beating at him with his epee. The great room reeled as Seven spun over. He scrambled to his feet, sword still in hand, leaping back around the big table to get himself set to ward off the vicious attack.

St. Hilaire meant to kill him!

Neither uttered a word. It was too well understood.

Seven knew that he had to kill this madman or be killed by him.

They duelled in deadly earnest. They duelled as if they were the last two men left on earth and that their purpose was the total destruction of each other.

The bell-like ring of steel, the quick-quick shuffle of feet, the sharpening of breaths became their whole world. Nothing distracted them. Sounds outside didn't sink into Seven's concentrating brain. The sound of running feet and children's fearful cries and the slamming of doors.

Life depended on the perfect twist of the wrist and the hawkeye of a surgeon.

All of a sudden the great room was full of people, children babbling and Banner's hoarse bellow: "What a time for you two to be playing comic opera!"

Playing comic opera!

Seven was shouldered roughly aside. Children ran between them. The vicious Robespierre face of St. Hilaire retreated beyond swordpoint.

Banner said gruffly: "The vampire's loose again!"

That ended it!

EVERYBODY WAS RUNNING. SEVEN RAN WITH THEM.

"Where?" he asked.

"Outside in the belvedere!" shouted Banner. He led the way across the courtyard, through a cavernous and damp arch, following up the railings of forged iron to an iron gate that opened up to the grounds.

The others were left behind.

Seven and Banner sludged through the trampled snow to the gaunt stone tower.

Breathlessly they paused against the old watchtower wall.

"I'd just come back to the chateau," grunted Banner. "Five of the school kids were running away from this place, screaming. They'd seen the vampire pelting down these stairs and it skeered the oh-by-jezis outta 'em!"

"Which kids?"

"Cricq, Simplon, and three others."

"What were they doing out here?"

"I dunno. I ain't ast 'em yet," hollered Banner. "You standing around and yammering all day or are you coming up with me?"

The old wall was full of secrets. Against it grew shriveled ivy. Snails crawled in the crevices of the stones.

At the top of an iron stairway that twisted like a corkscrew was a round tower room, fitted with a few odds and ends of rustic furniture, with windows that gave a commanding view of the grounds.

And death was in there too.

A little girl, to be known as Therese Jullien, was lying crumpled on the floor.

"Gawdamighty!" said Banner almost in awe.

He knelt beside the body of the child, lifting the limp arm for the pulse. "Dead! Strangled—just like Raoul Pax!"

Events moved so rapidly that Seven's head spun.

Her thick-lensed black-rimmed eyeglasses lay smashed beside her. There were a few other items in the room: a spirit lamp for heating a coffeepot, tin cups, a nearly-stale loaf of French bread, some lurid comic books, and nude art pin-ups.

On the wooden tabletop were some dried drops that looked like blood.

"Let's hear what those kids have to say," said Banner, trundling down the twisting iron staircase again.

Back at the *Ecole des Enfants*, the five children told substantially the same story, except that Cricq's version was the most vivid. Cricq and Simplon and the other three had gone to the belvedere for the purpose of holding a meeting in the top room. That was their castle, the headquarters of their secret clique, where they hid their treasures. As they started up the stairs, a chilling sight came around the turn at them, the thing that had just done murder in the tower. Tall, they said, wrapped in a sort of cloak. And the face—it really wasn't a face. It was something horrible. Iron. Yes, it had iron jaws. It paused and stared at them. Cricq cried, "The vampire!" and they all ran for their lives.

"Where was everybody?" Banner wanted to know.

Lucienne was deep in the kitchen, cleaning up the lunch dishes.

"I was with St. Hilaire," said Seven ruefully.

"Yass. Making like the Prisoner of Zenda," said Banner scornfully.

Thinking back, Seven wasn't very proud of his antics. But what could he have done to have prevented Therese Jullien's death?

"It's in my blood. I was brought up on Zorro and D'Artagnan and all the rest of them."

"D'Artagnan, eh? *The Three Musketeers* and *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *Twenty Years After*."

"You're familiar—" began Seven.

Cricq, all but forgotten, was standing in the classroom, against the smudged blackboard, listening to them. The room smelled of disinfectant and ink and it looked out at the bleak branches of chestnut trees. Seven turned at that moment and caught the expression on Cricq's face. It was a startled look, as if he had just thought of something significant. Recovering himself, Cricq smitted a hurried, "*A tout a l'heure!*" and darted out.

"That kid's unpredictable," said Seven.

"Un-huh. A nimble mind in a nimble body . . . didja notice that Simplon had cut his finger?"

"What?"

"While I was talking to 'em just now, Seven, the cut had opened up again and Simplon was getting his handkerchief all bloody trying to stop it."

"Blood!"

"I took him aside and ast him how it happened. He said he'd gashed it on an old nail up in the belvedere tower earlier this morning."

"So! That explains the blood drops on the table, Banner."

"Does it?" said Banner tantalizingly.

WHILE INSPECTOR FIGOUROUX AND THE MEMBERS OF HIS *Brigade Criminelle* returned to examine the belvedere for the evidence of murder, Banner asked Lucienne to show him the room where Therese Jullien had lived. Lucienne explained that some of the students slept in a dormitory, some in more private rooms, depending on how well their parents were fixed financially. Therese had a room to herself.

Left alone with Seven, Banner surveyed the room overlooking the cobbled street of the Rue de la Nuit. It appeared at a glance that Therese was a voracious student, but not all her reading was scholastic. She had, without a doubt, studied her French history, for her neatly piled text books attested to that; though, by bar, she was a more avid student of crime.

There was one tall stack of crime magazines, a certain fire hazard, leaning crazily out of one corner.

"What ghoulish minds these kids have," said Seven.

Banner looked sour. "What'd *you* think about at that age? They seem normal to me."

"They would," said Seven scathingly.

Banner padded around, frisking the chest of drawers. There were clothes, hats, dresses, underthings. There was a box of Marquise de Sevigne chocolates, most of its contents nibbled away. In another box were a few bits of correspondence addressed to Mlle. Therese Jullien, care of the *Ecole des Enfants*. Several postcards from her parents, who lived in the Midi.

"Somebody'll have the miserable job of letting them know," said Seven.

Banner grunted.

"Do you think this so-called vampire is murdering on an insane impulse?" said Seven.

"No."

"What connection is there between the killings of Pax and Therese?"

"I dunno," admitted Banner frankly. It was a chilling admission that even his formidable mind could not supply the answer.

Banner had found a letter. He was pulling it out of the envelope. It was brief.

"It," said Banner, scanning the typing, "is from the circulation department of *Detective Photographique*. They're letting her know that her yearly subscription to the magazine has run out and she oughta renew it."

"From the looks of that pile, she must have spent all her allowance on subscriptions."

"Yass," said Banner absently. He was peeling off his frock coat to stand revealed in a peppermint-striped shirt and well-thumbed turkey-red suspenders. "Gimme a hand here."

"Doing what?"

"Going through these magazines."

A good hour later they had completed the job, and then they had only skimmed through each one. True crime magazines, American, French, and English, were strewn all over the floor. Seven's hands were all grimy with dust and cheap printers' ink.

"Didja notice what I noticed?" asked Banner, rolling his wide sleeves down again.

"You're not putting one over on me, Banner. Sure I noticed. They're not here."

"Not a one!" said Banner with a bounce. "What d'you make of that?"

Though Therese apparently had a subscription to *Detective Photographic*, there was not one copy of it to be found in her magazine-filled room.

IT WAS NIGHT.

A night full of grand-guignolesque revelations, when the unreal became the real, and the real became the unreal.

The red room had come into its own. It was lighted only by the lurching flames of the fireplace, transforming all into the past. The large bundled figure in the red armchair, sitting close to the fire for warmth, might have been one of the great personages of the French Revolution. But when he lifted his thick arm to shove the mangled wet end of a long stogie into his mouth, he was revealed as Senator Banner swaddled in his wraprascal.

Still, to Seven, the illusion of the past was difficult to break.

"As crummy as your company is," said Banner malignantly, "I appreciate it tonight. I got a funny feeling that we're the only ones left in this place."

Seven shivered. There were very few places as cold and lonely as an old chateau in the dead of Paris winter. Yet they were making an attempt at creature comforts. On a taboret between them were generous helpings of old Napoleon brandy and hot coffee, cigars and cigarettes.

Apricot-colored lights gilded the thick panes of the leaded windows. Weirdly plaintive cries mingled with the tramp of many feet came up from the courtyard. Banner quit the depth of his armchair and shambled across the room to peer out and down. The torch-flames lent a dancing illumination to his ruddy face at the window.

"The kids from the school," said Banner as the sounds and lights died away, "have banded with other kids in the neighborhood. They're going to storm the cemetery to capture the vampire."

"What can they do?"

"Kids're cruelly vindictive. They're armed with sticks 'n' stones 'n' pocket knives. Remember the Children's Crusade in the Middle Ages?"

"Yes," said Seven.

"These kids've heard that the vampire's strangled and eaten two children."

"Eaten them?"

"Rumors grow as they spread." Banner returned to the armchair. "Figouroux has some of his *flics* guarding the cemetery to keep 'em all out, but I think the cops'll have their hands full."

Seven could imagine them storming over the cemetery wall, shouting

and waving the pocket knives and dodging the gendarmes, and beginning a hunt among the gravestones.

"Figouroux," continued Banner, "is blaming horror comics and horror movies for the whole riot. There's a pitcher playing at the Bijou now that's about a half-bat-half-skeleton critter clawing its way through a morgue."

Banner's voice died out. The room was red and old with the rust and cobwebs of antiquity. It swallowed Seven up in its bygone maw.

They were back in the Reign of the Terror. The tramping feet and the flambeaux belonged to the citizens of the Commune. Cartwheels rumbled by outside on the cobblestones of the Rue de la Nuit. It was the tumbril loaded with aristocrats on their jumbling way from the tribune to the guillotine for another harvest of heads.

A half-burnt log tumbled into the glowing ashes with a shower of sparks and Seven returned with a jolt from yesterday.

Banner's cigar was lighting up like a Roman candle. The cognac and coffee passed freely between them.

"They won't find the vampire," said Banner.

"You mean the kids?"

"Yass. It'll be up to us."

"What makes you so sure, Banner?"

"D'you know the secret of the footprints in the snow and the locked tomb?"

"No, I don't," admitted Seven.

"Just as well you don't. If you'd taken the trouble to dope it out, like I did, you'd find yourself in an even more hopeless muddle."

"How so?"

"You, sir, will have to fit into any theories you form this added unalterable fact: the strangle-murders of Marie Oursin and Henri Millet."

"Never heard of them," said Seven curtly, because he felt at a real disadvantage.

"Course not," nodded Banner. "They were killed years ago, just after the Occupation ended. Those were outrageous days. Paris was in an uproar. General Leclerc's armored divisions had come in to liberate the city. The collaborators were getting short shrift, being rounded up and stood against the barricade and quickly shot. And the women who'd slept with the German soldiers were chased nekkid through the city and shaved bald . . . Marie Oursin and Henri Millet were a couple kids of that violent time."

Seven frowned. "And you're telling me that the one murderer is responsible for all these killings."

"Yass," said Banner slowly and carefully. "All these child-murders've been committed by one and the same person. That fact's worth repeating. But that's the fact that'll drive you loony before we're through . . . Now! What's it you wanna know?"

"First of all, how *my* overshoes became involved with the locked tomb. That's humiliating."

"You gotta learn to get up off your keester and figger these things out for yourself, Seven. And ain't you gonna figger in the blooddrops in the belvedere tower along with the overshoes?"

"If you say so, Banner."

"I'm letting you do the saying, for a change. I'm facing you up to the facts. Waal! Can'tcha dope out those footprints? Go back to the beginning. What kinda prints didja see coming into the cemetery from the east gate?"

"Cricq and Simplon and Pax made a confused jumble."

"You couldn't distinguish anything in detail?"

"No," said Seven.

"*Tray bone!* What next in sight?"

"We found Pax's dead body in the trampled snow. Then the clearly etched prints of Cricq and Simplon running away from the scene of the crime toward the west gate. And the clear-cut prints of the vampire coming from the tomb and going back to it."

"Stop right there, Seven. Think about it. Why don'tcha reverse the way the vampire's prints go?"

"To the tomb and back again to the dead body! That'd be even more impossible! Instead of going through that rusted-shut tomb door, the vampire would have had to vanish into thin air!"

"Mebbe that's just what *did* happen," said Banner thoughtfully.

"That's lunacy!"

"Izzat so? Foller it up! The vampire, we know, was wearing your overshoes. Couldn't *anybody* wear those?"

"I suppose so," conceded Seven. He started to follow Banner's line of reasoning. "One of the boys that ran away could have worn them. Cricq! He could have put on *my* overshoes, walked from the body to the tomb, turned around on the step, and walked back to the body again. He could have then taken off *my* overshoes and carried them with him as he ran out of the graveyard with Simplon. That means that Simplon was in on it with him."

"Simplon had a cut on his finger. Cricq had a dirty adhesive covering a cut on *his* finger. Does that explain blooddrops in the belvedere tower where they hold secret conclaves?"

Seven felt the dizzying revelation. "They swore a secret pact in

blood. Simplon agreed to back up whatever story Cricq told. You said that Simplon was only a poll-parrot. The purpose was to make it appear that the vampire had gone back into that particular tomb, which hadn't been opened in over 150 years."

"Yass?"

"But somebody *had* been in there just before we entered," said Seven.

"Think about that. What were we all doing?"

"We were bunched up around the tomb door. Figouroux was having trouble turning the rusty lock. At last it gave and the door creaked inward and we all pushed forward. You tried to light a match, but the stale air snuffed it out again. In a few seconds you got out your flashlight and we saw the word VAMPIR freshly scrawled in the dust on the lid of the coffin."

"We were in almost total darkness for how many seconds?"

"Not more than fifteen at the most."

"Hah! And where was Cricq when the light came on?"

"Stuck in between your legs. You nearly fell over him as you started to walk forward."

"You'll agree with me, won'tcha, that he's fast-witted and nimble?"

"I agree, Banner. We all agree to that."

"So how long d'you think it'd take him to slip in between my legs, wiggling his wiry li'l body in the crowd, get to the coffin, scrawl one word in the dust on the lid, and duck back again—all before I got a light on?"

"Under fifteen seconds—easily!"

"Observe fifteen seconds ticking off on any watch. It gives ample time to perform this prank." Banner sipped more cognac. "The low window-glass in the door of the mausoleum coulda given him the general location of the coffin during his previous prowling in the cemetery and he didn't have to do any fumbling around for it in the dark. The legend carved in the stone outside the mausoleum could tell anybody the condition of the Duc de Gotha's corpse inside. And," questioned Banner, as Socratic as Socrates himself, "what conclusions d'you draw from all this?"

"That," said Seven, feeling his hackles rise, "that Cricq is the vampire! That Cricq is the murderer! But it's still impossible!"

"Why?" said Banner with a hidden chuckle.

"Granting Cricq and Simplon are in cahoots, were the other three children who saw the vampire on the belvedere stairway in collusion too?"

Banner's jaw snapped shut like a steel trap. His arm thumped down

on the wing of the chair. "No," he said soberly, "they're all telling the truth."

"And you said the murderer strangled two more children in Paris just after the war."

"Again, that's true."

"Cricq couldn't have murdered *them*! That happened before he was even born!"

"I told you," said Banner slowly, "that when you knew the answer to the tomb it'd leave you even farther up salt crick than you were before."

WHEN BANNER STOPPED TALKING THERE WAS AN ENORMOUS SILENCE in the old chateau, broken only by the pop of the bed of embers and the chatter of clocks in the hall.

Banner's voice came back like a knell in the silence. "I ain't ast you the final question, Seven. What happened to the key?"

"What key?" said Seven, befuddled.

"They key to the mausoleum, dammit! The new key that Figouroux had made to open it. After we all came outta there, Figouroux slammed the heavy door shut and twisted the key, locking the tomb again. Then," he resumed, his black furry eyebrows wiggling fiercely, "what unspeakable thing happened?"

Seven groped his way back, focussing his mind on the incident. "They key was left in the lock for a moment. Then—oh, God, yes!—that snowball"—he struggled to keep a straight face—"that snowball knocked your high hat blooping off." He broke up and grinned at the remembrance.

"Yass," said Banner blackly. "Somebody made a jackass outta me. Me—who was trying to be dignified on a dignified mission. Haaak! Every eye was on me picking up that dented hat. If I get my paws on—Waal! 'Nuff said! When I looked at Figouroux again he was looking quizzically at me. Y'know why? The key was now missing from the lock! Stupidly Figouroux was wondering if I'd taken it—and I was wondering if *he'd* taken it. Neither one of us had it. The question is: Who's got it now?"

"Cricq!"

Banner stirred uneasily. "You're positive?"

"I saw Cricq go through the pantomime of packing a snowball, then signalling someone—probably Simplon—just before you got it."

"That's it!"

"As an ex-military man, Banner, you'll know Clausewitz's definition of war. A trinity of violence, chance, and reason. Murder can be

defined the same way. We've had the violence, we've had the chance, now we need the reason."

"I don't think Clausewitz meant reason to be motive, but it's close enough."

"What is the reason?"

"Why don't you go and ask Cricq?"

Seven stood up and buttoned his jacket. He hated to leave Banner and the fire and go out into a phantasmagoria of cold and snow and murder, but nothing remains constantly the same. Everything changes.

"Before you go—Lucienne told me to give you this." Banner grubbed in his roomy pockets and then handed Seven a small square lavender envelope.

Written neatly on scented paper, the note was short:

Mon Ami: I am sorry for the trouble I have caused you. I am very fond of you, as you know. But the dictates of my heart direct me to go to someone else. For better or worse, Guy and I are eloping tonight. He is waiting to meet me now. I will always think of you. Adieu, Lucienne.

She was gone.

"Don't take it so hard, sojer," snorted Banner. "The world's fulla women."

"I know," he said.

He returned the note to the envelope and put it carefully into his pocket and left.

HIS STRONGEST IMPULSE WAS TO GO FIRST TO WHERE Cricq slept.

Cricq was another one with a private room. His parents had money.

On the chest of drawers was an untidy pile of magazines. Seven spread them under his hands. A dozen copies of *Detective Photographic*—from January to December. These were the same magazines that were missing from Therese Jullien's room.

Seven was sure that Banner knew about this. Banner's encyclopedic mind, it seemed, knew everything.

Cricq, however, was not there. Nobody was there.

Seven went out of the chateau and up the Rue de la Nuit to trudge through the snow around the cemetery. He saw a caped gendarme standing guard in the east gate and dodged him. He saw nothing of the rioting children, though there were faint outcries in the distance. The moon was pale, behind thin clouds, giving enough light on the snow to make everything unearthly luminous. Seven found a place in the shadows and chinned up on the wall and climbed over. Dropping down, he mushed uneasily among the headstones and fallen Corinthian

columns.

There was a mild disturbance at the west gate as the gendarme there chased somebody away. Otherwise all was quiet.

Seven crouched behind a broken sarcophagus into which was chiseled the words *Requiescat in Pace*. What he was waiting for he was not sure.

The clouds thickened and darkened the moon. The shadows in the graveyard became blacker. Seven started at noises that were only the sounds of the frost gripping the stark trees.

Then he heard heavy footfalls, unguarded and ominous, cracking the crust of the snow, coming nearer. A huge black shadow haunted the tombstones. Seven crouched lower, ready to pounce on the apparition.

The footfalls creaked to within a few feet of Seven's hiding place. A sepulchral voice intoned: "I know you're someplace. Where in blazing hell are you?"

The words sounded blasphemous in the graveyard. Seven rose up to full height.

Banner, in the black wraprascal and top hat, hulking under a fallen marble angel, looked like a vastly overfed Count Dracula.

"So you've joined the party, Banner."

"Gotta keep my eye on things. Seen anything yet?"

"No. What're we expecting?"

"Another murder."

There was no mistaking Banner's genuine apprehension.

"Another child?" whispered Seven.

"Yass. This one we gotta stop."

"Who—?"

"Quiet!" clamped down Banner. "There! Lookit!"

There were scurrying sounds first. Then a small form went pelting across the snow like a terrified hare. The small form darted, zigzagging among the tombstones.

"It looks like Cricq," said Seven. "It is!"

"Can y'see who's hound-dawgging him?"

"Must be a gendarme. They've been—"

"For crissake use your eyes! Look!"

"It's the vampire!"

Cricq slipped, spun, avoided the grasping arm of the thing in the flapping cloak, a faceless thing that was indeed iron-jawed.

Seven wanted to spring forward.

Banner hauled him back. "Wait!" he growled.

Cricq struggled free, ran again. Seven heard breath sucking the cold night air and the sound of metal grating on stone and the slam of a

heavy door.

Seven's teeth felt as if they were all glued together. "There's an all too-familiar look about that vampire."

"It's something *we'd* recognize in a jiffy," said Banner. "We've seen it hundreds of times." He was like a galleon in a vast calm. "But in France, yunnerstand, the major sport is cycling. Mebbe some soccer or basketball, but the French don't like to play on teams. Solitary sports for them. They're individuals . . . That's the reason why *they're* not familiar with it, Seven. C'mon! Giddap!"

They circled to get a better view of the tomb of the Duc de Gotha. It was the slamming of the door of that tomb that they had heard. Now standing in front of it, though well back among the tombstones, they could see a white face staring out into the pale moonlight through the small square glass window in the door. Somebody was locked inside.

But it wasn't the vampire.

That awesome creature was outside on the step, making ghoulish efforts to get into the tomb, snarling animal noises at the terrified white face inside.

Banner lumbered forward, Seven on his heels.

The vampire turned its iron face upon them, but it was too late. The curse no longer worked, the evil spell was broken.

Seven and Banner grappled with it and bore it out into the moonlight. It fought with feline efforts to get free. In the fierce struggle the iron face fell off.

Guy St. Hilaire was springing suddenly up among them, the graves echoing his awful cry, his face dirty white and devilish for revenge, his strong hands seeking a throat.

Banner beat the hands down.

Seven was stunned, looking down at the object that had fallen to the snow.

It was a baseball catcher's mask.

IT WAS THE LAST TIME SEVEN WOULD SEE THE RED ROOM.

Inspector Figouroux was there with Banner and all three were sampling the old wine, the Auvergne *eaux-de-vie*, in bottles of curious shapes and sizes, they had found stored in the cobwebbed oubliettes under the chateau.

"Cricq's all right," Banner was saying. "He used the key he'd swiped to lock himself in the tomb to escape being strangled like the others."

"He is a quick-witted boy," said Inspector Figouroux, letting cigarette ash dribble down the front of his soiled white vest.

"Too quick," said Banner. "He got himself in a pack of trouble." He paused, scowling at the chewed end of his stogie. "This's an interesting case of mass murder, if you wanna call it that, where an unrelated incident occurred in the sequence of killings to provide the murderer with a perfect alibi and the opening to strangle some more. That whole chicanery in the graveyard wasn't a murder at all! Y'lissening?"

Seven started. He wasn't in a mood to talk much after the heart-breaking revelations of the night.

"Come now, senator!" cried out Inspector Figouroux. "We found the body of a boy there, manually strangled. Who killed him?"

"Nobody," said Banner.

"Nobody!" shouted Inspector Figouroux excitedly. It became more confusing.

"Lemme talk, willya! Raoul Pax strangled himself with his own hands."

"Incredible!" cried Inspector Figouroux.

"Entirely credible. The reliable American Medical Association lists the case of a boy who accidentally strangled himself while practicing a jujitsu hold on his own throat. We know that Pax likewise practiced jujitsu. Another case, in your own Department of the Seine, Figouroux, is the one of Jeanne Weber, known as the Ogress of the Goutted'Or, who, after committing a series of child-murders similar to these, strangled herself in the asylum at Mareville. There's a case in Britain of a man killing a gal by merely chucking her lovingly under the chin. Vagal-inhibition death can be caused by a very light touch, hardly any touch at all. All this shows how easily death at the throat can be caused. Also take—"

"Pray say no more," beseeched Inspector Figouroux. "I am already shamefaced."

"To continue," said Banner, soured at the interruptions, "Cricq and Simplon were in the upsetting predicament of having Pax kill himself accidentally in front of them. Cricq was known as the Terror, the wild boy of the school. Who'd believe him and his sidekick Simplon? They'd all say *he'd* killed Pax. At least, that's the way Cricq looked at it. He hadda screw his way outta the fix. He swore Simplon to secrecy in blood, he swiped your overshoes, Seven, and we know what he did with 'em in the graveyard. We've been all over that. The scrambled footprints leading in from the east gate merely covered up the fact that Cricq and Simplon were half-carrying-half-dragging Pax's limp body to the spot where we all were to find it. The trappings of the vampire were spawned in his hot li'l brain, inspired by the horror movies he'd

seen and the added knowledge that the corpse of the Duc de Gotha had an iron head. What Cricq didn't know was that he was setting up the *real* murder of Therese Jullien by the *real* murderer!"

Seven took a despairing breath. He listened closely as Banner went relentlessly on, groping in vain to find some flaw in all this logic. Outside the leaded windows the cold dawn was making green-gold streamers across the night sky.

"I'll make it quick," said Banner. "It's been a long night and we're all tired. I feel older'n Methuselah . . . The strangler," he hammered home, "collaborated with the Nazis in Paris during the Occupation of France. When the city was liberated by American troops, there were wholesale arrests of traitors. This traitor's activities were going to be exposed to the police by two observant children, Marie Oursin and Henri Millet. The traitor strangled these two kids to keep them quiet, but was caught redhanded anyway. At the trial the defense was insanity, and instead of being stood against a wall like the others and shot, this person was committed to the Villejuif Asylum the criminally insane on the outskirts of Paris, to be released a few years later as cured. The person disappeared."

Banner was in full stride. "We next had a li'l gal here at the school addicted to magazines of true crime, among them *Detective Photographic*, which in this last month featured the story of the Oursin-Millet killings—complete with pitchers. There, staring up from the page at Therese, was one of the teachers here at the *Ecole des Enfants*. This person hadn't changed in appearance much over the years. Therese made the mistake many victims make—letting the murderer know that she knew. If this li'l gal babbled it around, thought the killer, the scandal of having a child-murderer running a child's school would ruin everything. Therese Jullien hadda die, and Cricq's horror set-up with the vampire in the graveyard made it apple-pie for the murderer to do away with Therese in the belvedere tower."

Banner paused only long enough to wet his whistle with another healthy swallow of *eaux-de-vie*.

"The murderer got rid of all the *Detective Photographiques* in Therese's room, so that nobody else would read them, but there was one slip-up. The notice from the magazine telling Therese that her subscription had expired and reminding her to renew it. When I found all the magazine copies gone, it looked fishy, and I got back issues from the editorial office. I'll confess that this's the first time I've found the solution to a murder by reading it in a magazine. Hah! I left the dozen copies in Cricq's room, knowing that when the murderer saw them there, the implication would be that Cricq also had read them and knew

the answer. Then *he* hadda die too. I think Cricq had a partial glimmer of the truth when I mentioned to you *The Man in the Iron Mask*. He thought of the unused catcher's mask among the other forgotten baseball equipment in the armoire along with those swords you played *opera bouffe* with, but he still didn't know who was wearing it . . . The murderer pulled a bold stroke getting rid of the incriminating magazines, tearing 'em up right in front of you and burning 'em. *You know, Seven.*"

"Yes, I know," said Seven, with a great sadness. "I even supplied the match to light the fire in the grate for Lucienne Gallon."

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

Brooklyn born gunman William H. Bonney is better known by what name?

Played in movies by a variety of actors, he was known as Billy the Kid.

What was the nickname of convict Robert Stroud, played by Burt Lancaster in a 1962 movie?

He was known as The Birdman of Alcatraz.

What was the name of Adolph Hitler's dog?

The pooch's name was Blondi.

Under what names are bankrobbers Parker and Barrow better known?

Portrayed in several movies, the desperados are Bonnie and Clyde.

It was the Magic Kingdom, where such things didn't happen except in fantasy—or did they?

The House That Walt Built

by BRUCE E. CEASAR

M-I-C,

See you real soon . . .

WHEN THE SAFETY BAR OF THE SHELL-LIKE VEHICLE snapped open, Katie Hagardon carefully eased herself out onto the automatic walkway and immediately flashed a broad smile over her left shoulder. But Katie's intended recipient, her best friend, Judy Easton, wasn't there to catch that gleeful expression. In fact, the only people who did witness it were two Junior high school girls from Simi Valley, and a creepy looking character shabbily dressed in something right out of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Katie stepped off the ramp and made a full 360-degree turn, her eyes scanning the cramped, stony chamber. Except for the doorway directly behind her, there didn't seem to be any other openings. She glanced back at the little "doom buggies" emerging single file out of the darkness. By now, a much different crowd was departing from them and was quickly pushing past her toward the exit sign. Judy wasn't among them either.

Katie couldn't believe that Judy was the type who'd chicken-out and run. For God's sake, haunted house or not, this was Disney-land—home of the dreamers, land of the mouse. Nobody but the

youngest of children would be the slightest bit alarmed by this attraction.

So why would Judy?

No, the whole idea was absurd. Unless, of course, she had something like this planned all along. Now that would be more Judy's style—just quietly slip out of the buggy while her best friend wasn't looking and presto, watch how Katie makes an ass out of herself by shouting to the empty car behind her.

Just the thought of it made Katie's cheeks burn with embarrassment and anger. She vowed right then, she was going to throw Judy to the crocodiles once they got on the Jungle Cruise. Now all she had to do was find her, endure the inevitable chortling, and then, Judy, baby—a quick dip in the old crock pot.

Still fuming, she slung her purse strap over her shoulder, whirled around, and ran head-on into one of the Disneyland attendants. He was dressed in the stereotypical undertaker's uniform that looked like Bela Lugosi's suit from *Dracula*. (An effect purposely created to blend with the tone of the mansion.) At first glance, you might have felt a sense of eeriness by his overall appearance. But upon a second look, you'd have noticed the perfectly styled Sassoon hair and the deep, even Coppertone tan—a description pretty common among all Disneyland attendants. These kids were the creme de la creme, the pride of the Yankees, those chosen few who could make you feel guilty for being born without a mouthful of shiny, white teeth. And despite herself, Katie had always felt a certain dislike for them. She had no good reason to, not really. They just irked her. They were the Young Americans, and like the song said, they were ALLLLLLL RIGHT—every damned one of them!

Katie took a step back and gently rubbed the tip of her nose. "For crying out loud, what were you doing standing that close behind me, anyway?"

"I'm sorry," he said, raising both palms in a gesture of peace. "I was just about to ask if something was wrong when you turned around."

"Well, dammit! You should've announced yourself!"

"You're right, I should have. I'm really sorry," he said, extending his hand. "Friends?"

Katie looked at it but made no move to shake it. "Okay, okay, friends."

The attendant dropped his hand without the slightest embarrassment and began to smile that famous Osmond smile. "Good. Now is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes . . . yes there is," she said, eyeing his pearly whites. "First, you could start by telling me if you've seen a girl pass by here—say, in the last three or four minutes, about my age and height with blonde, shoulder length hair."

He shrugged. "What was she wearing?"

"A cream colored halter-top and blue jeans . . . oh, and she had quite a unique shoulder bag. It was made of raffia straw and trimmed in leather."

He didn't answer. He just stared at her helplessly.

"Never mind. Just tell me this. Is there any other way out of here other than the exit door behind you?"

"Just one, but that's always locked."

"Damn. All right, one last question. Could someone stay in one of those cars and then ride all the way back around?"

"No way. That's why there's always somebody here on duty. Say, what's this all about?"

She began to nervously finger the strap of her brown corduroy purse. "I don't know . . . well, not exactly. You see, Judy and I—that's her name, by the way, Judy Easton—anyway, Judy and I came down in that elevator together, and after they opened the doors, we both made a mad dash for the cars. I . . . I thought I was way ahead of her, but now I'm not so sure. And yet, I'm almost positive I heard her shouting behind me just as we were taking off. Does that sound crazy to you?"

"No, not really. If the buggies hadn't gone too far, your friend could've had time to jump out and go back up the front entrance. The attendants let people do it all the time. You know, little kids that are too scared or people who are sick . . . situations like that. Do you want me to call up front and ask if anyone went up recently?"

"No. I doubt if it's as grave as that."

"Look, no problem. Wait here a second, I'll be right back."

Before she could stop him, he had already grabbed a handset hidden behind a long marble divider that ran parallel with the ramp. His face remained calm and expressionless as he spoke into the phone, but even at this distance, she could detect a certain icy intensity flickering in those eyes. It made her feel extremely uneasy. She really didn't need this kind of TV melodrama, this brand of "Dragnet" sobriety.

This is the Magic Kingdom. It rests on the outskirts of Anaheim, California, roughly eleven miles from the Pacific Ocean. On any given Saturday between the months of June and September, approximately 70,000 people will roam in and out of the park. There are seven different lands, over fifty attractions, forty-nine shops, thirty places to eat, and about 110 acres of parking. Most of the time, tourists will

spend their vacations here without misfortune. But every once in a while, somebody turns up missing. That's where I come in. I carry a badge . . . right, Bill?

Beats me, Joe.

After a few minutes, he returned carrying a clipboard under his arm and looking much too worried. "Well, it appears we struck out. As far as they know, nobody's turned back all afternoon," he said. "Are you sure she wasn't ahead of you?"

"She probably was. Look, I apologize for all the trouble. I guess this is just Judy's way of being funny. And in a bent kind of way it is, if you really stop and think about it—funny, I mean." Katie sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of her nose. "The crocks are going to think it's funny too."

"What?"

"Forget it," she said sullenly and started to walk away.

"Hey, wait a minute! If you don't have any luck finding her, get in touch with Disneyland security. If anyone can locate her, they can."

She gestured toward the exit way. "Thanks again. But more than likely, she's right outside."

He smiled, but his eyes said something else. And as she walked out of there, she got the weirdest feeling there was more going on in that house than even that attendant could ever imagine . . . or, would ever want to.

K-E-Y,

Why? Because we like you . . .

THREE HOURS LATER UNDER THE FADING LIGHT OF THE afternoon sun, Katie sat on a park bench in the center plaza directly below Sleeping Beauty's castle. She was bent forward, her delicate chin resting on one knee as she examined the heel of her left foot. There, a blister the size of a walnut had formed. It was moist and translucent and sagged with the weight of its watery fluid like an old woman's breast. God, how it hurt. Even with her shoe off, it hurt. For the last forty-five minutes, she had hobbled up and down Main Street, passing from one shop to the next, wading through an endless stream of unfamiliar faces. But Judy was nowhere to be found. Not there, not in Adventureland, not in Tomorrowland, not in any land. Something here was frightfully wrong. Judy had been mischievous before, yes—but never out-and-out cruel. It didn't make any sense. Who would venture all the way from Pasadena to Anaheim, (a fifty minute drive, no less) and spend twelve dollars for a ticket just to blow the whole evening

playing some childish prank? No one would, dummy. That's the point.

Oh Judy, where in the hell are you!

Katie was only faintly aware that she was crying. She sat back up, wiped the wetness from her cheeks, and for the first time, noticed the man sitting several benches down from her. It only took a second to place him. It was that weirdo-eccentric she had seen earlier in the Haunted Mansion. If there were ever an exact double for Old Ebenezer, this guy would be it. He wore the same fingerless gloves, the same moth-eaten muffler, and the same soiled, grey velvet top hat. She wondered how the old fart ever got past the front gate looking the way he did. Or, for that matter, how he managed to cough up the twelve-dollar entrance fee. But then, weren't all misers supposed to have a small change purse bulging with solid gold coins? This time, she studied him more closely. No, not entirely all. Not this one. His total life savings were divided into two small traveling bags he clutched tightly to his chest. The larger of the two resembled one of those old-fashioned medical kits country doctors were once obliged to carry. And from what she could make out, the other bag . . . well, the other bag looked as though it were made of . . . made . . . of . . .

She had quite a unique shoulder bag. It was made of raffia straw and trimmed in leather!

Katie's body began to tremble wildly with a mixture of fear and rage. She could feel it building inside her, rising steadily in her throat, thick and choking. It all suddenly fit together. Judy's unusual silence during the ride, her disappearance coinciding with the arrival of the miser, and now, the discovery of the shoulder bag.

Meaning what?

Meaning she has to be lying somewhere in that hideous retreat, tied up or unconscious.

Unconscious? Don't you mean dead? Isn't that what you're trying to say, Katie? Dead?

From deep within her came the low, primeval, growling sound of revenge. Her breathing was coming in short, harsh blasts, and the muscles of her body, ballooning with adrenalin, threatened to explode. Slowly, she began to stand, holding the edge of the bench for support. Taking that first step forward was like wading through thick syrup. But the second step proved less sluggish. And by the third, she started to gain momentum.

Before she reached the halfway point, she was running at a pretty good clip, getting her knees up, keeping her head low. With her right arm extended skyward, she started swinging her corduroy purse like a flail. Her long throat kept working as she swallowed again and again.

And as she closed the distance between them, she released a hoarse, frenetic cry. "BBBAASSSTTAAARRDD!"

The old man snapped his head around, took one look at the vindictive warrior bearing down on him, and in a blink of an eye, bolted from the bench. He ran straight for the Matterhorn, his mouth ajar, his coat-tails flapping in the wind behind him.

KATIE NEVER NOTICED THE EXTRAORDINARY SPEED AND agility of her adversary. She never even felt the blister on her heel. So blind was her determination that one thought, and only one thought occupied her subconscious now—stomping that mother as far into the depths of hell as she could.

As they zigzagged back and forth across the wide thoroughfare, she watched the old man effortlessly carve a trail through the oncoming tourists. A middle-aged Oriental man was literally propelled into the stone wall surrounding the moat, his head striking with a sickening hollow crack. Katie saw a young woman, donned in only jogging shorts and a tube top, go skidding almost thirty feet before grinding to a bloody stop. Another woman, a seventy-seven-year-old grandmother with hardly enough skin to cover her bones, stumbled and fell when she tried to spin out of the way. She landed squarely on her stomach, directly in the madman's path. Her meaty son-in-law instantly jumped between them like an offensive lineman protecting his quarterback against the blitz, but was catapulted backward, dropping heavily on the frail knuckles of her spine.

When the old man neared the mountain, he veered to the right, staying close to the base wall that circled it. The wall itself stood better than eight feet high—over five feet of wrought-iron fencing imbedded into three-and-a-half feet of masoned stone. With one quick motion, he threw the bags over and took a giant leap high enough to get one foot hooked on the edge. He hung there for a moment, shifting his weight in order to gain the maximum leverage to pull himself clear. That brief hesitation was all Katie needed. She bounded up after him, clutching at the tail of his tattered coat for purchase.

"You stinking piece of slime! You killed her, didn't you! Admit it, dammit! Admit it!" she exclaimed in a voice that was ready and high and wild.

She never saw the blow coming—a calcareous composition of solid male elbow. It connected just above the left eyebrow, snapping her head back, turning her legs to jelly. She fell in a sprawling, flaccid heap, ripping her earlobe on a section of chain used to cordon off the Matterhorn's exit area. By the time her head cleared, the old man had

already retrieved the bags and was a third of the way up the mountain. When she tried to get up, a security officer firmly pushed her back down.

"Let me go, you moron! He's getting away!" she croaked.

"Easy does it, miss. You just lie back now and rest."

"But he's getting away!"

"He's not getting away. We've got the whole mountain surrounded."

From all around her, she could hear the drumming of footsteps racing by, and the excited yelling of the crowd. "Surrounded?"

"That's right. Shouldn't take long now."

Katie looked beyond him and saw fifteen to twenty security personnel fanning out at the foot of the slope. The old man had disappeared. "I . . . I think he killed my best friend."

"Where?" he said, turning his head in the direction of the horoughfare.

"The Haunted Mansion."

"Jesus," he whispered, "that makes two now."

"What did you say?"

"Huh? Oh . . . ah . . . nothing." He quickly centered his attention elsewhere. "Hey, c'mon, Jimmy! Hurry it up with that first-aid, will ya'!"

Just then, another officer began shouting. "Frank! The captain says for you to get your fat buns over here! That maniac's holed up in the cave, and we need someone to work this spotlight!"

"Be there in a sec!" The security officer sighed and knelt close to her. "Listen, do me a big favor, will ya'? Stay put until Jimmy gets here. Okay?"

She nodded her reply, and he left.

AFTER HE WAS GONE, SHE GRIPPED THE CHAIN ABOVE her head and pulled herself to a sitting position. Something wet and warm trickled down the side of her neck, and her left eye felt puffy. She squinted up at the opening they referred to as the cave—which wasn't really a cave, but a tunnel where the Skyway passed through—a height of about sixty feet. The old man was bent over the edge, kicking at the men crouched on the shelf below. Suddenly, he was grabbed from behind and, with an astute deftness, he reached back and savagely hurled the officer over the cliff in a free falling death dance. Several people screamed. A maintenance man next to Katie fainted dead away. And somebody by the spotlight kept frantically repeating, "That was Danny Kenton! That was Danny Kenton!"

Katie stood up weakly and leaned against the cold iron fencing. She could see the old man snapping his head back and forth, shifting his focus between the officers on the ledge outside and the men advancing in the tunnel. He was in a blind alley with no possible means of escape, not a prayer in the world for a getaway. And yet, he found one. From overhead, something caught his attention roughly the same time it did Katie's. It was the Skyway. Forty-four orange and blue gondolas were still lazily drifting along the steel-fibered cable in silent, suspended procession. During all the confusion, nobody had thought to shut it down. And now, she realized he knew it was his one-way ticket to freedom.

Before she could cry out her alert, he bounded an unbelievable distance, grasping the gondola's side bumper guard one-handed as it passed through the mouth of the tunnel. The empty car violently swayed outward, counterbalancing against the sudden added weight. It jerked and bucked and made a horrible grating noise as the wheel assembly pinched the cable. But it never stopped. The gondola dutifully continued onward, its stowaway hanging there poised like the Statue of Liberty.

From the ground below, tourists ogled in a paralytic stupor, their mouths agape, their voices temporarily abandoned. Katie began pushing her way through them, trying to keep pace with the old man. In the distance, she heard an officer yelling orders to cover the Tomorrowland terminus, and four patrolman shot past her in a dead heat.

When she caught sight of the gondola again, it was directly above the shoreline of the lagoon, dangerously rocking from side to side. Katie was still too far away to identify the problem. She needed to get closer.

Once she reached the fence, she saw what was happening. The old man was trying to build up enough momentum to swing out into the lagoon. He reminded her of a trapeze artist preparing for the death-defying triple somersault. But the oscillation here was much too choppy and labored. Metal gnashed against metal. Sparks flew. And just as he got it to arc out over the water, the wheel assembly snapped off the cable. Katie didn't think the old man even knew it because he was still struggling to make the gondola swing back again when he hit the pond, landing flat on his back. From that height, it was the same impact as going off the roof of a six-story building with a VW strapped to your belly. The old man never surfaced.

The nightmare, at long last, was over.

M-O-U-S-E . . .

THE ANAHEIM POLICE FORCE ARRIVED AT APPROXIMATELY 8:00 p.m. It was nearly 10:30 p.m. by the time they finished searching the Haunted Mansion. Photographs were taken, fingerprints had been lifted; every inch of the interior was closely examined, inspected, and scrutinized. Nothing was overlooked. Nothing was left untouched. But then again, nothing had been found either. Judy was still missing.

Katie stood on the mansion's front steps with a homicide detective named Livermont, and Captain Boyer of Disneyland security. Questions had been asked and answered repeatedly. They went over it and over it from beginning to end. And when something didn't sound just right, they would back up and start again.

"When and where did you last see Miss Easton?"

"In the Haunted Mansion, earlier this afternoon."

"Was there anything Miss Easton said at the time that sounded odd or out-of-character, something that might have hinted at her present whereabouts?"

Katie had thought about that one a long time. "Yes . . . now that you mention it, she did. At least it was odd, anyway."

"And what was that?"

"I don't know. It was just some morbid rhyme she tried to scare me with as we were going down the elevator . . . something about ghosts and hobgoblins. She said she read it a long time ago in one of those horror magazines." Katie closed her eyes tightly and concentrated. "Sorry. I just can't remember."

"That's all right. We'll come back to it," he said. "Now, Miss Hagardorn. Did you actually see the old man leaving the mansion with your friend's shoulder bag . . . "

After an hour, the inquiry had mercifully ended. Katie was exhausted. She didn't know who or what to believe anymore. Incredulous as it sounded, there hadn't been a trace of Judy in or out of the mansion. And what was even crazier, the old man's body had somehow disappeared, too. That wasn't just crazy, that was impossible! A corpse couldn't vanish in a man-made pond that was supposed to be cleaner than drinking water. It had to be there somewhere. She knew it. Just as she knew Judy couldn't be anywhere else but in that midnight house of horrors.

Livermont and Boyer were almost to the police blockade before she caught up with them. "Captain Boyer."

He turned and looked at her attentively. "Yes, Katie."

"Are you planning to reopen the mansion tonight?"

"Why?"

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"I . . . well, I'd like to take one last look around if its all right with you."

The two men exchanged glances. "She's not in there, Katie. I thought you were aware of that."

"Please, Captain Boyer. After everything that's happened today, I think I've earned it. I'm not saying you didn't do your job, it's just that I've got to satisfy myself."

Boyer glanced at his watch, then at Livermont. "Do you have any objections, lieutenant?"

"Our investigation here is through. I can't see any reason why not."

Boyer smiled wearily at Katie. "All right. But I think it would be best if you were accompanied by one of our attendants."

"Dammit all!" she hissed. "I wish you two would stop treating me as though I were some kind of helpless infant. I don't need your wet nurse or your friggin' concern."

Boyer started to open his mouth to object, but decided against it. The truth was, he didn't have the energy to argue the point. "Okay, okay. Let's do it this way then. I'll let you go through it alone, but you'll have to do something for me. Now, I'm going to post one of my men at the rear exit, and when you come out of there, I want you to follow him back to City Hall without any altercation whatsoever. Do we have a deal?"

She tried to smile, a valiant effort. "Deal."

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG BEFORE THEY HAD THE MANSION ready again. The attendants were reassembled, the gates unlocked; the houselights properly dimmed. When the front doors were finally opened, the clock on the Main Street railroad depot was just striking twelve midnight . . . the hour of doom.

Katie was among the first group to go in. The air seemed unbearably thick, if not clogged, with nervous expectation as they jammed together in the large, octagonal elevator known as the Portrait Hall. The doors snicked shut, and the elevator began to descend, elongating the walls and paintings above them. A few people recognized Katie as the girl the police had questioned earlier, but not many. They were interested in bigger game. A girl with a black eye and a stitched earlobe wasn't half as exciting as the remains of an honest-to-god murder. Although one couple was bold enough to ask her if she knew the girl. Katie just glared at them with an insane look on her face. They didn't ask again.

When they reached the bottom, the amateur detectives rushed ahead of her in a frenzy to get to the entrance ramp first. She could hear their loud whoops of laughter echoing in the distance as an attendant helped

her get in the buggy. And just before she was swallowed by the blackness, she caught a glimpse of him eyeing her from behind his control board and speaking into a phone. Captain Boyer wasn't taking any chances this time.

It took perhaps two or three seconds before her eyes adjusted to the muted lighting of the corridor, but she missed nothing. Somehow, she felt the mansion had changed. Not physically. Not in the sense that someone had tampered with the sets themselves. But more in the feel of the place. It had become grotesque and unearthly as though she were entering a new hellish dimension, an orifice of oblivion where the tongue of death lapped ravenously at her soul, waiting for the right moment to devour it completely. She began wringing the safety bar very hard. The fear inside her became so intense that it seemed to ooze out the pores of her skin like sweat.

Yes, the mansion had once been Disney's creation. She wondered whose it was now.

With the cold, foreboding voice of the Ghost Host reverberating in the speaker above her ear, Katie continued on past a series of ominous chambers and corridors. During that time, something kept tugging at the back of her brain. Something that only came in short fragments. A word here, a segment there, but still all too blurred to understand. Her tired mind whirled. All concentration was lost to a thousand different thoughts and images that funneled into her consciousness in random succession: Judy whispering in her ear as they rode down the elevator together; the old man plunging earthward to his watery grave; herself hanging at the end of a rope from high atop the Portrait Hall, the noose imbedded deeply in her swollen neck, and the outline of a hideous figure with bright red eyes and lips smiling in the shadows above her. Katie squeezed the safety bar even tighter.

By the time she reached the "graveyard," the palms of her hands were raw and bleeding. Tiny droplets of blood spattered on the tops of her shoes, creating little scarlet stars where they landed. She didn't even see it. Her eyes were transfixed on the immense chamber before her. Normally, this area was satiated with the sights and sounds of jubilant confusion—transparent musicians playing some grisly tune, ectoplasmic socialites from the eighteenth and nineteenth century sharing ghostly tea with Egyptian mummies, a set of faceless busts singing in perfect, impromptu harmony like a barbershop quartet—but now, the cemetery stood in utter stillness. All eyes were locked on Katie.

The buggy pushed onward.

Katie never moved, never once breathed. The only noise penetrating that dead soundlessness was the voice of the Ghost Host, and the drum-

ming of her own heart. Her temperature felt as though it had plummeted several degrees below absolute zero. Almost all perfunctory thought processes seemed to short circuit, allowing the most infinitesimal of recollections to slip through. One of these hit her just as the buggy left the graveyard and was entering the final stretch of the ride.

It was then that all hell broke loose.

UP AHEAD, THE CORRIDOR MADE A SHARP, FORTY-FIVE degree turn to the left. In the dead-end wall overlooking the turn was a huge showcase where three more apparitions awaited, their thumbs cocked to the right. Katie stared at them in hypnotic fascination as the Ghost Host's interminable, monologue droned on. ". . . and just in time. There's a little matter I forgot to mention. Beware of Hitchhiking Ghosts!"

Katie was close enough now to make them out. The ghost on the far right was a heavily bearded midget carrying a convicts ball and chain. The one in the center looked like an English aristocrat of long ago, complete with stand-up collar, fake cuffs, and a long wool overcoat. But the third ghost Katie had never seen before, and yet, had known all her life. It was a female with shoulder length hair and dressed in a halter-top and blue jeans. Katie's body began to shake uncontrollably. "Oh dear God, am I really seeing this?"

The buggy drew closer.

" . . . and they'll haunt you until you return . . ." the Ghost Host continued.

Suddenly, the words of Judy's poem sprang to the surface of her mind.

*If your convictions lack faith for the blood-chilling wraith,
Then fear not, there is no cause to grieve . . .*

"This is madness!" she screamed.

The buggy was now only inches away.

*But beware my old friend if you do comprehend,
For the spirits take those who believe . . . believe . . . believe . . .*

"Oh Christ, don't . . . no, don't . . . nooooooo!"

Yea, Mickey . . .

OUTSIDE, THE SECURITY OFFICER TOOK ANOTHER DRAG from his cigarette and watched the tourists file out of the exit door. A rather lanky fellow with a stand-up collar came out last. He stopped and methodically fastened the top two buttons of his wool overcoat, nodded to the security officer, and strolled into the darkness. The

officer noted the brown corduroy purse the gentleman was carrying and shook his head in disgust. He slowly shifted his gaze back to the exit door and waited.

Yea, Mickey . . .

SIX WEEKS LATER ON THE SUBMARINE VOYAGE IN THE lagoon, a woman and her husband from Craighead, Arkansas goggled wide-eyed at the underwater show.

"My gawd, Ralph. Do ya' see him?"

"See who?"

"The man on that boat over thar'."

"Whar'? I don't see no man."

"Not thar', you idiot. Over thar'."

Standing behind the wheel of an ancient Spanish galleon, was a short, stocky sea captain. His attire wasn't exactly military. Not unless top hats and mufflers were standard issue back then. But he did seem to feel at home aboard the vessel, almost as if he belonged there.

The woman turned to the Disneyland shipmate. "What did you say this here part of the ride was called?"

"Graveyard of Lost Ships," he replied.

Yea, Mickey Mouse!

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

What do Chester Morris, Richard Kollmar, and Kent Taylor have in common?

They all played the part of Boston Blackie, in films, on radio, and on TV.

What private detective was shot and killed at the corner of Bush and Burritt Streets?

Sam Spade's partner, Miles Archer, was shot on this San Francisco street corner by Brigadier O'Shaughnessy with a .38 Webley Fosbery automatic.

Anyone could slip and fall down the stairs. It was an accident. Sure it was!

Peaceable Kingdom

by JON COHEN

ON THE DAY OF THE FUNERAL NO ONE FILLED THE BIRD feeders. No one piled old apples or lettuce leaves against the trunk of the sycamore at the edge of the meadow. Or put out scraps on the back walk. Along the side of the trash pit, no one left cans with a little something in them to lick. No one scattered hickory nuts near the back door. Nothing came from the Jensen's farm house that day.

Down the dirt road, past a few isolated houses and lonely barns, past the quarry and Pritchard's orchard and beyond town a mile or two, a respectful group gathered in the corner of the cemetery. The Jensens were there too, but they did not stand with the sad little group. Apart from them Dave Jensen clutched his hat and peered down into the raw grave. He listened to words that held no meaning for him, examining with expressionless eyes the fat rectangular box. "Must be shock, terrible grief, that makes a man look like that," they whispered to one another. When the service ended and there were no more polite words or solemn hands to shake, when everyone had gone, Dave Jensen turned and stared one last time at the coffin that held his wife. He stared, and slowly his expressionless eyes came to life. Then he licked his thin lips and smiled.

A FEW DAYS EARLIER JENSEN WAS IN HIS KITCHEN TALKING with Stan Baker, the sheriff. Out back the crew from the county ambulance smoked their cigarettes. Finally one of them stubbed his

against a tree and came into the kitchen. He coughed and said, "Uh, we're through here, sheriff. Ready to take her into town if that's okay with you."

"Okay with me, Jim. You go on ahead," Baker said.

Jim stood a minute, then said, "I'm sorry about Rita, Dave. We all are. She was a good neighbor."

Jensen looked up at him and smiled appreciatively. Jim turned to go then stopped in the door. He spoke quickly, with excitement. "You know, standing out there looking across your land, Hank and I we must have seen four or five bucks, and a couple of foxes. Hank swears he seen two brown bears, pheasant, and god knows what all. You really do have some kind of game preserve out here, don't you, Dave?" Jim looked down and laughed abruptly, embarrassed for saying too much at the wrong time.

"That was Rita," Jensen said quietly. "She did all that, spent all her time feeding those animals. Fed them better than me, sometimes." He shook his head and clucked his tongue as if the memory were a fond one.

He rose and stared out the window. The trees were filled with birds, and the bushes along the meadow twitched with hidden movement. The buzzing of insects was very loud. "They came to depend on her seems to me, and that's no good for an animal."

He looked over at Jim. "Guess I'll have to take up some hunting again, thin this place out. Rita never allowed that, like everybody knows. But I guess things got to change now, don't they?" He sighed. "I'll give you and Hank a call sometime. You can help me out if you're interested."

"Thanks, Dave. That'd be real fine." He put on his hat. "Well, got to go. And like I said, we'll sure miss Rita."

Sheriff Baker sat stirring his coffee. "This is a terrible business, Dave, and I'm sorry. But I have to go over it one more time quick, then I'll let you be."

"Do what you got to do, Stan."

"All right. You said you were down in the field below your pond. You were there all morning cutting down an oak. You came back up here at twelve-thirty. You always eat at twelve-thirty."

"Yes."

"Only this time there wasn't anything on the table."

"And that worried me, Stan. Even if Rita was up in the woods putting something out for the animals, she'd be sure to get back in time."

"So you knew something was wrong. You called upstairs for her,

then went out back and called again. Right?"

"That's right, Stan. Then I come back in here, and that's when I see the cellar door is open." Jensen took a breath and closed his eyes. "The light's on. I figured she was down getting a jar of pickled tomatoes or something. I remember saying . . . saying to her this morning that it would be nice to have some of those tomatoes for lunch. A little thing like pickled tomatoes." He stopped.

The sheriff touched Jensen's elbow and said gently, "Go on, Dave."

"Sure. Sorry, Stan. So I went to the door and looked down. Those damn stairs are so steep, and the light's no good. I looked down and off into the corner. I thought it was a pile of clothes. Then I knew it was Rita. I ran down to her, but her neck—" He stopped again and the sheriff squeezed his elbow. "But her neck was so broken. It was terrible, there was nothing I could do. Then I called you."

"She slipped and fell, Dave."

"But if I had been here." Jensen looked up at the sheriff with deadened eyes.

"If you had been here there'd still be nothing you could have done. I've seen this before, Dave. These things happen."

"I shouldn't have asked for the tomatoes."

"Don't blame yourself, Dave."

Both men sat quietly for awhile. Then Sheriff Baker rose. "I'm going back into town now, fill out the report. There should be nothing to it, Dave." He fiddled with his sunglasses as he spoke. "You gonna be all right?"

"I'll have to be, Stan."

"Listen, I'll have my wife . . ."

"Now don't you bother your wife to fuss over me." Jensen stood and took the sheriff's hand in his. "I'd like to be alone for a time. You know."

"I know. I'll call you this evening."

"Thank you, Stan. Be seeing you."

JENSEN WATCHED THE PATROL CAR DISAPPEAR DOWN the dusty road. Then he turned and surveyed his land. So many birds, it didn't seem possible the trees could bear the weight of them. In the meadow the grass stirred restlessly, as if pushed aside by unseen animals. A cloud of bees hung in the sky, actually cast a shadow as they passed overhead. Something growled in the woods beyond the pond. *This place definitely needs thinning out*, he thought.

He closed the door behind him and laughed, quietly at first, and then so hard he had to hold on to the refrigerator. How incredibly easy.

How incredibly easy to kill your wife. You just slip up behind her and give her a quick shove and there she goes. Then you call the sheriff and roll your eyes and wring your hands and gulp a little, and that's all there is to it.

It was an accident. Rita Jensen was sweet and harmless. She wouldn't even hurt a fly. Not a fly, or a mouse, a deer, or a crow. Who would ever harm her?

Dave Jensen would.

He was choking on her sweetness, he was sick of her animals. He hated being cooped up with her, hated listening to her, hated the years of watching her do for others and never a thought for herself. So good it gagged him. Smiling and bustling around, never a rotten day. It can get to you. It got to Jensen so badly that the happiest moments of his life were spent this morning sneaking up on his wife and shoving her down the cellar stairs. And if her neck hadn't snapped he'd have hauled her up and dropped her again. But, and he almost regretted this, it wasn't necessary.

And now the land was his. He hadn't killed her for it—he just wanted rid of her. But now they were *his* thousand acres. He married into this place, and he'd taken care of it the way she said. He never touched her animals. He took care of the cows and pigs, planted and plowed the one field that grew their vegetables. All like she wanted—he did it without a word. And the rest of the land stayed wild. Like Jim said, a game preserve. But things would change now. Jensen stretched and smiled then headed for the cellar. It was nearly suppertime and a little tomato pickle to go with his meal would taste mighty good.

WITH A PINT OF RUM IN HIM AFTER SUPPER JENSEN FELL asleep early that night. He hadn't bothered to undress, hadn't even gotten his boots off before passing out. Until well after midnight he slept like a dead man.

Then the whispering woke him.

He awoke instantly, alive with a frightened clarity. He felt something in the room, something watching him. When he moved, the whispering stopped briefly, then began again. The sound, he realized, was not a human one. It was more of a muttering, broken by sighs and whines. He could not catch their meaning though the sounds seemed coordinated and purposeful—a communication between living things. Then silence.

That's when Jensen became aware of another sensation. He remembered falling asleep with his clothes on. Why then did he feel the cool night air on his legs and feet? He turned on the bed table lamp. It took

a minute for the drunken spins to settle and for his eyes to adjust to the brightness. Jensen was not a man to cry out, but now he gasped. He lurched and stared down at himself. His boots lay in pieces at his feet, and both legs of his pants were split open at the seams. He carefully picked up a section of one of the boots and squinted at it. Something—a mouse, rats—had methodically chewed along the stitching. There were teeth marks. His pants too, right up the seams, as if they had been cut with tailor's shears. All that slicing and chewing and yet not a mark on his flesh.

Jensen was not an imaginative man. He pulled off his ruined pants and the rest of his clothes and got into his pajamas. He threw out the pieces of his boots. As he bent over the trash can he became aware of a soft beating sound, a muffled throbbing. He thought it was coming from inside his head. The beginning of a hangover? It became insistent, external. He looked over at the small window above the bureau, and then quickly at the two larger ones across the bedroom. Moths, hundreds of moths, some tiny and some hideously large, like bats, white and tan and black, hundreds crawled and throbbed against the screens. *What the hell*, thought Jensen. *What the hell?* He ran over and slammed the windows shut, beat his knuckles against the glass. The light, they must be coming to this little light. The only one on for miles around. He pulled the chain and sat on the edge of the bed, listening in the dark. He knew they were still there. An hour passed. Another, another, until finally morning came. And when he awoke, stiff and unslept, and looked up at the windows, the moths were gone.

HE SPENT MOST OF THAT DAY PLAYING THE GRIEVING husband. Plump farm wives dutifully came and brought him food. They told him stories about Rita, described to him again and again how good she was. And he smiled at the end of their stories, because each one reminded him how glad he was to have come up behind her as she stood at the top of the cellar stairs. They shook their heads and he shook his. And they took his hand and he squeezed theirs back.

"And those poor animals," they said. "It's like Rita left behind a whole lot of children. All those children without their mother."

Jensen thought, *Don't you worry about all Rita's children. I'm going to take care of those children. I most surely will take care of them.*

Stan Baker came by again, not as sheriff this time but for a sympathy call. "You're holding up well, Dave," he said.

"I'm trying, Stan. Listen, thank your wife for the ham. Everybody's been real good to me. People are good."

Stan pointed to Jensen's left hand. It was bandaged. "What

happened to you?"

"Damnedest thing. A sow bit me. I was down in the barn this morning tending to the cows. I'd already put the pigs in the pen. I didn't shut the gate to the pen, never have to. I'm facing the cow and I'm reaching behind to get the milking stool, and one of the sows sneaks up and bites my hand."

"Pigs'll bite you, they can be mean," said Stan.

"Sure they can. But here's the thing," said Jensen. "This old sow bites me and *holds on*, and just stands there looking up at me, right into my eyes." He bends over and pulls up his pants cuff. There's a huge bruise on his shin, black with a green border. "I'm about to take a swing at her with the stool and before I do the cow kicks out at me. Believe that, Stan? Kicked and bit."

"Animals can be mean, no doubt about it. You get that hand looked at, you hear?"

When Stan left, more wives dropped by, then the undertaker. They talked quietly, and the undertaker nodded occasionally and wrote on his pad.

"We'll keep it simple then, Dave. I understand."

"I know that's how Rita'd have it," Jensen said. "She was a simple woman."

AFTER SUPPER THAT EVENING JENSEN SET OUT MOUSE-traps in his bedroom. He sprinkled rat poison along the baseboards and inside closets. Rita never knew but he'd been using the poison in the barn for years. Finally he went down into the cellar and brought up his shotgun and a box of shells. He took the gun apart, cleaned and oiled it, adjusted the sights. What he'd like would be to go hunting with Hank and Jim right after the funeral tomorrow. He was getting real tired of the wildlife around this place. And the not so wild life too—there were certain cows and pigs he could do without.

Jensen did not drink that night. He watched some tv, talked on the phone a bit. The undertaker called twice with some questions about flowers and whether he wanted Rita buried wearing her glasses. Jensen held his hand over the phone and laughed at that one. He told the undertaker yes. If Rita should happen to wake up, he thought, he wanted her to be able to see exactly where she was.

BEDTIME. HE WENT TO THE BACK DOOR, LOCKED IT, checked the stove, then went around to the living room. He opened the front door and stepped out into the night air. Thirty feet before him, moving up the front walk like a guest coming to dinner, was a gigantic

eight-point buck. The buck paused and reared, kicking its forelegs toward the moonlit sky. A piece of flowered cloth hung in its antlers. The buck tossed its head and the cloth landed at Jensen's feet. It was Rita's favorite summer dress. That afternoon he had gathered up a bunch of her clothes and thrown them into the trash pit behind the barn. Shaking, he ran into the kitchen for the shotgun. When he returned, the buck had disappeared into the still night.

He slept fitfully. Beside him in bed, in Rita's spot, lay the shotgun. But nothing happened. No moths, no whispering, nothing moved. His injured hand pulsed. He could not get comfortable. Sometime just before dawn on the morning of his wife's funeral he finally drifted off.

HIS ALARM JARRED HIM OUT OF HIS SLEEP. HE STUMBLED through his chores in a daze. Then he came back into the kitchen and fixed breakfast, cleaned up, and finally, more awake, put on his hat and headed for the barn again. It was the third time he walked by his car, only now he noticed it. It seemed impossible he had not before. His dark blue Chevrolet was splattered by the birds, coated thickly, like white icing on a blue cake. The sides of the car were scratched, clawed to metal in thin, parallel lines. Jensen backed away slowly, then as he had the night before, he ran to the house for his shotgun. But what was there to shoot? There were no birds in the trees, nothing moved in the meadow. No growls came from the woods, no sounds at all. The stillness was more frightening than anything that might have appeared. He was alone.

JENSEN DROVE TO THE FUNERAL IN RITA'S OLD BUICK. Folks just thought it was his way of trying to stay close to her and felt sorry for him. He nodded to his neighbors, then took his place apart from them. And while the minister droned on, Jensen stared down into the grave. Overhead, a crow circled. It had trailed Jensen's car as he drove to the cemetery and would follow him again when he left for home.

And the minister talked on, and Jensen stared at the coffin. "Poor man," they whispered to each other, "he just can't believe she's gone." *Goodbye Rita, Jensen thought, so long, old girl. It won't be the same without you—it'll be better. And don't you worry about your critters. I'll look after them like I looked after you.*

And the minister finished, and Jensen took the hands that were offered to him, and the black bird circled. Then folks drifted off and he and Rita were alone together one last time. Jensen's heart danced, his small eyes took in the sight and he grinned. Licked his thin lips and

grinned. He nudged a little dirt over the side of the grave. It thudded softly on the coffin. A little more. He looked over his shoulders and all around him, then kicked hard at the mound of dirt. Then he got into the car and drove away from the cemetery.

HE PARKED BESIDE THE BARN, CUT THE ENGINE, AND and listened for a moment. He peered over the steering wheel, then got out slowly. The air was hushed, the land still. Behind him the crow settled noiselessly on the branch of a dead tree. The cows and pigs, why were they so quiet, too? He tugged on the barn door. The stalls were empty—there *were* no cows and pigs. Jensen held his breath as he made his way back to the car. He turned the key and nothing happened. He tried again, then got out and lifted the hood. A wire to the distributor cap was cut. No. It had been chewed. Very quickly and deliberately chewed.

The shotgun. It stood propped against the kitchen table. With his eyes fixed on the front door he walked slowly toward the house. He stepped inside. The smell was incredible. The air was thick with the odor of animal, musty and foul. Jensen squinted, his eyes teared. He covered his mouth and nose with his hand. Then the door slammed shut behind him.

The shotgun. He headed for the kitchen, reached for the gun. A rattlesnake coiled around the length of the barrel, mocked him with its flicking tongue. The shells lay strewn across the kitchen table, dark powder spilling from the split sides. Even if he'd gotten to the gun he would have had nothing to put in its chambers.

Clusters of bees began to gather on the screens and windows. Like the moths, only the bees did not come in search of light, but to block it out. The rooms darkened, the drone of the bees intensified. Jensen tried a light, then another. They didn't work. He closed his eyes and hugged himself and stood very quietly in the middle of the living room. He wondered what the snake was doing.

IT WAS JUST BEFORE DUSK WHEN THEY WERE AT LAST ready for him. He had stood for hours, breathing in the animal stink, listening to the impossible variety of sounds. Listening to them gather.

The door opened very slowly, and for a moment the light blinded him. The buck, the one he had seen the night before, lowered its head and walked through the doorway. On its antlers two owls perched and a cluster of tiny sparrows. A brown bear with a raccoon on its shoulders followed the buck. The animals moved slowly around Jensen, then the buck lifted a foreleg and nudged him toward the door. It nudged him

each step of the way, and when he got to the door the bear raised a paw and gave Jensen a shove. Just like he had shoved Rita. Outside, he was greeted by a din of growls and chirps and spitting sounds, by barks and hisses, yowls and screeches.

And then silence.

Jensen looked around him, his wide eyes trying to take it all in. He was surrounded by every kind of animal he'd ever seen. They stood together, chipmunk beside fox, snake with hawk, coyote and ground-hog. Turtles, frogs, rabbits. And on and on. To his left his cows and pigs nodded their heads at him. And above all these beasts the birds perched in the trees. Gnats and butterflies and mosquitoes and wasps hovered in shimmering clouds.

Jensen began to babble and the animals leaned forward to catch his words. He smelled them, the air as redolent as it had been inside the house.

"She fell," he whispered. And then louder. "She fell, Rita fell." The animals moved closer and Jensen backed away. But he had nowhere to go.

"Listen. I'll feed you. I promise. I'll put food out." He dropped to his knees. "Don't."

A terrible communication seemed to pass among the animals. Jensen watched as a field mouse broke from the crowd, scurried up the front walk and paused before him. Then it moved again, leapt on to his pants, crawled up his leg to his shirt and crossed his left shoulder. Jensen felt a hot sting as the mouse bit his ear. He remained motionless as it jumped to the ground and disappeared among the other animals. From behind a cardinal swooped and pecked him twice on the back of his head. A wasp stung his thumb. He opened his mouth to scream, and a rabbit hopped high into the air and bit off a piece of his lip. One after another they descended on him, taking turns, waiting patiently to strike. It was long after dark when they finished with him.

STAN BAKER WAS JUST BEGINNING HIS DAY. HE GOT INTO his patrol car and drove through the early morning streets, turning onto Broad, and stopping at the light. When the light changed, Stan did not move because a crow had just landed on the hood of his car. The black bird walked calmly toward the windshield, then stopped and dropped a golden object it had carried in its beak. It cawed twice and flew off. Baker reached out the window and picked up a gold wedding band and read the inscription inside: "Rita to Dave 5/10/54."

He drove immediately to Jensen's place. In the barnyard he saw nothing unusual. A few birds flew overhead. A squirrel started down a

tree, then thought better of it and waited on a branch twitching its tail. Baker looked in the barn. The cows turned toward him with dull curiosity and turned away again. A pig grunted and scratched its back on a post.

Baker started for the house when he saw the crow hovering over a white form. He headed down through the meadow toward it. Against the trunk of a lone sycamore slumped a human skeleton. Beside its feet lay some shredded clothes and a wallet. Baker flipped through it, then stared up into the hollow eyes of the skull. "Jensen?" he said. "Dave?" He knelt down for a closer look. There were hundreds of nicks and gashes along the bones. The edges were gnawed and irregular, as if the skeleton had been discovered and chewed by countless animals over the course of many years. ●

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

What was the name of the evil-fighting organization, led by Richard Henry Benson, headquartered on Bleek Street in Manhattan?

Benson, better known as The Avenger, was leader of Justice, Inc.

What is Michael Lanyard's nickname?

This TV series character is known as The Lone Wolf.

Kate, mother of Arthur, Fred, Herman, and Lloyd, was an outlaw better known under what name?

She was known as Ma Barker.

Who is Sir Miles Messervy, K.C.M.G.?

He is M, James Bond's supervisor.

It was just another ancient, shabby seaman's dive—just the right sort of setting for the Big Leather Jacket Heist of '84!

Petty Theft On Dock Street

by JERRY JACOBSON

HAVING SWORN FOR FIFTEEN YEARS HE'D NEVER BE caught dead in the Dock Street area of town, Detective Sergeant Sam Leschi, a big enough and brutish enough Greek to be able to take care of himself very sufficiently, plunged the unmarked police sedan into the stilled shadows of the bad part of the city. On his Investigation Report form, he had already logged the day and time: 11:46 p.m. on a Tuesday evening. His destination was the Anchor Inn at 255 South Dock Street, a seaman's tavern that had occupied its dingy hole-in-the-wall location as far back in the city's history as to have been a landmark bar for the shanghaiing of seamen for ship crews in the 20's and 30's. Leschi had read that in those pre-depression years, almost as many

merchant sailors went out the back door of the Anchor Inn unconscious and wrapped in tarps than came in the front door thirsty and on two feet.

The dispatcher's radio message had been short, sweet and more than a little enigmatic: "*Any unit in vicinity, see the male customer, Anchor Inn, 225 South Dock Street, jacket theft.*" If this was to be Leschi's Crime of the Night, he was going to bring his logs back in a sealed envelope, talk to no one about his night and escape the precinct by a rear door.

The Dock Street area lurked below the city's business district, nearer to sea-level, a cargohook's toss from the port piers, the container docks and the wharf warehouses. The fog was continually ankle-deep here and kept to its place like the winos and panhandlers and stray dogs that hounded the meatpacking plant on Freight Avenue. It was a world of exiles and transients, of the pitiable and the passers-through, where one out of every two shadows had the capacity of movement and where two out of every three events that happened to mankind were bad.

At Second Avenue, Leschi swung the unmarked left onto Dock Street. His headlights put a momentary spotlight on a bum slumped in the doorway of the Elite Hotel. Passed out dead drunk on back-alley vino or unconscious from being rolled for pocket change—you paid your money and you took your choice. The fog hid so much of what went on down on Dock Street that crime statistics were nothing more than wild guesses.

THE ANCHOR INN WAS AT MID-BLOCK. THE ANEMIC RED neon was pale and sputtering like a knife victim dying and about to give up his last ounce of blood. A squad car was parked in front of the tavern at the curb. Leschi rolled up behind it, turned off the ignition, got out and walked up to the officer who was filling out a report behind the wheel.

"The jacket victim?" Leschi said through the open window.

The patrolman was a young part-Indian named Hyduk who'd had the skid row patrol for nearly a year and had arrested relatives and friends and was a good mediator in the constant stream of drunken tribal posturing and angry disputes that happened down here as nightly as sunsets.

"A sailor, sergeant," Hyduk said to Leschi. "Stationed at the Naval Training Center at Pier 91. Put on his civvies and came into town for a few beers. He claims the bartender lifted his leather jacket while he was playing pinball. I took the complaint, only I can't make an arrest without witnesses or evidence."

"Think it's worth a trip inside?"

"You pay for your thrills," said Hyduk. "Me, I'd rather watch water drip or grass grow. For right now, I got a drunk in the Union Gospel Mission who doesn't understand there's no more room in the inn. Gotta run him up to Detox and hope to hell I don't have to clear my unit after I drop him off. You have yourself a charming night now Leschi."

Leschi took out a cheroot and lit it as the patrol unit slipped off into the night. The Anchor Inn would be a no-win situation. It would be the complainant's word against the bartender's and after a lot of jawing and hot air, Leschi would tell the sailor to head on back to the training station and tell the bartender to close up for the night, and then make a note for himself that the bartender was a pretty good bet to be a thief

The Anchor Inn was just another ancient, shabby seaman's drive. Fishnet was draped across the ceiling, entrapping dusty glass floats and bleached, brittle starfish from another millennium. The place was empty except for the heavyset bartender and the young man who sat glaring at him on a stool at the end of the bar. His schooner glass was empty; the bartender had likely cut him off over the incident and was now praying the sailor would come over the bar top at him so he could legally take his head from his shoulders with a sawed-off ball bat.

Leschi grinned nicely and lifted his ID card into the stale air.

"More police," said the heavyset bartender, with the same irony as a man serving iced drinks in his cabin on the *Titanic* as it collided with the iceberg and sent a small mountain of ice in through an open porthole.

"Just a follow-up investigation."

"Follow-up to *what?*" challenged the bartender. "This guy can't keep track of his clothes, some customer waltzes out the door with his leather jacket and suddenly it gets treated like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre."

Leschi grinned again and turned toward the young man at the end of the bar. His eyes had a glazed, fixed look, which told Leschi he'd easily fail a breathalyzer test. But he was steady on his stool, which hinted Leschi would at least get a coherent statement from him. He placed the young man on the near-side of tipsy.

"You the complainant?" Leschi asked him.

"Yes, sir. Philip Gardner. Seaman First, Communications Specialist. I'm stationed at the Naval Training Center at Pier 91, Audio-Video Center."

"Ah, show-biz."

"No, sir. We set up media equipment for classroom instruction and do repairs and maintenance. You know, film and slide projectors,

public address systems, classroom mikes, things like that."

"Are you sober enough to be able to tell me what went on here tonight?"

The young sailor threw a menacing glare in the direction of the bartender. "I haven't had a beer in twenty minutes. *He* won't serve me."

The bartender waved at a sign above the cash register. "I got the right to refuse service to anyone, Admiral Nelson. You make trouble in my place and you get cut off."

"All right, all right, let's put it on simmer for a few minutes," Leschi said. "I'd like to enjoy the remainder of this fine cigar in peace, and make some order out of recent events. In other words, gentlemen, I am here to appreciate a situation."

LESCHI ASKED PHILIP GARDNER TO KICK OFF THE DISCUSSION with his view of events.

"I came in here about ten o'clock, sir. I had a few beers. Two longshoremen were playing darts, a couple of hookers were looking for a little action, and two oldtimers were playing cribbage down at the other end of the bar. I knew one of the hookers. Her name's Bettina. Changed it from Betty. She used to strip at the Tivoli Palace Theater on Egger Street. She hit on me for a party with her girlfriend. You know, a threesome. I didn't have too much cash, the negotiations sort of broke down and they left."

"Go on," Leschi said.

"The cribbage players left about ten-thirty," the young sailor continued. "Then Bettina came back, hit on the longshoremen, and the next thing I know the three of them are going out the door. The process of natural selection. I decided to chalk it up to another bad evening and ordered another schooner."

"Then there was no one else in the place but you and the bartender when you claim your jacket was stolen?" asked Leschi.

"That's right, officer."

"He's lying like an Oriental rug," said the bartender. "Half-a-dozen customers came in before his jacket got lifted."

"Not a soul, officer. I swear."

"Okay, okay. What happened next?"

"Well, sir, things were getting deader by the minute," said Philip Gardner; "so I took off my leather jacket, laid it on my stool, got some quarters from the bartender and went across the room to play some pinball."

"The ones against the window facing Dock Street?" asked Leschi.

"Yes, sir. My back is to the bar the whole time."

The bartender let out a chuckle. "So how can he see a customer *didn't* walk out the door with his crummy leather jacket? Explain *that*, pinball wizard."

"I believe he already has," said Leschi. "He's stated there *were no* customers here. So if we assume that statement is true, then it wouldn't matter if he was playing Pac Man on the roof. Go on, Mr. Gardner."

"Well, I played pinball, had a couple more schooners, rang up a few free games. I played those off and went back to the bar for more quarters."

"And your jacket is gone," said Leschi.

"You got it, officer."

"I can't stand all this deceit," said the bartender. "I gotta have a drink."

LESCHI WAITED WHILE THE BARTENDER SPLASHED A LIBERAL amount of good scotch into a glass. It might have been illusory, but Leschi thought he'd caught him take a quick glance or two down at the dark end of the tavern where there was a hint of a hallway.

"Okay, barkeep," Leschi told him. "We're ready for your version of the Big Leather Jacket Heist of '84."

"What *version*? The guy's lying. A customer took off out the door with his Gucci-Pucci leather jacket. *That's* my version, officer."

"High marks for brevity," said Leschi.

"A story don't have to be a long one to be true," said the bartender. "It's just gotta be true."

"A salient point," admitted Leschi. There it was: the no-win situation. He had half-expected a little tapioca to hit the fan and then the plug got pulled. Hyduk had read the situation with the accuracy of a gem-cutter. No evidence, no witnesses added up to the secretarial duty of taking a complaint.

And then Leschi remembered the bartender's furtive glances down that hint of hallway.

"But we may have another way to go here."

"A lie detector?" The bartender's brows furrowed. "No chance, Jackson Browne. It's an imperfect instrument. Every court in the land will tell you that. And its results ain't admissible. So go climb up a rope."

"I was thinking more along the lines of what you've got down that hallway you seem to want to keep track of," Leschi said.

"Down my hallway? It's a hallway. It leads to the johns and the rear exit. Which is signed, in compliance with the fire codes."

"Nothing that would fracture your attention, then."

"Officer, I'm following you like a '38 Dodge after a new Fiat."

"Like to take a look at that hallway," Leschi said.

"It's a free hallway and it's a free country."

In just that spirit, Leschi rose and followed the bar north to the gulf of dim passageway, with the bartender along for the trip and breathing down his neck.

"Anything I can get for you?"

"I'll let you know when it has to be got," Leschi told him.

A hallway. Pretty much like any other. Two johns—Gents and Ladies. One rear exit, unlocked and properly signed. But another door. And padlocked.

"Got a key for this?" Leschi asked.

"Come again?"

"A key," said Leschi. "For this locked door."

"Sure. For every lock there's a key, for every man there's a woman."

"Just need a key," Leschi told the bartender. "My private life is another matter. And all the while, I'm waiting."

"Get it for you."

The bartender's disappearance was only momentary. Leschi accepted the key, separated from a ring of several, fitted it into the padlock and opened the door.

"Closet," he noted to the bartender.

"Bar supplies. Cleaning solvent, cans of wax for the shuffleboard, toiletpaper, rags, mops, sweeping compound. Just the usual."

"And coats on coathangers," added Leschi. "Many coats on coat-hangers."

"Personal property of customers. Jackets, coats, purses. My customers have a few belts, become forgetful and walk out leaving stuff behind. I collect it for safekeeping. They identify it and reclaim it."

"The Anchor Inn Lost and Found Department," said Leschi.

"Anything that don't get claimed after thirty days I give to the Goodwill."

Meanwhile a third presence had entered the hallway. The sailor shouldered his way past Leschi. "There's my jacket! The brown leather one next to the blue suede!"

Leschi reached into the closet and removed the brown jacket. It had the unmistakable feel of expensive leather.

"We seem to have found our *corpus delicti*."

"What *corpus delicti*?" the bartender said. "You found a jacket. Wonderful. Only it don't belong to Admiral Nelson here, because no articles of clothing got left behind in here tonight."

"It's my jacket, all right," said Gardner. "He took it from that barstool while my back was turned and ran it into the closet. I wouldn't be surprised if he dealt it off to someone else for a few bucks."

The bartender made a lunge at Gardner, but Leschi was standing partially in his way. "You hold your tongue, admiral, or I'm serving it as the free lunch with the pickled pigs' feet!"

"And *you* behave yourself," Leschi told the bartender, "or I'll make every attempt to stuff you into a stubbie bottle."

LESCI ESCORTED THE TWO COMBATANTS BACK TO THE bar area. The bartender felt need of a second drink. Philip Gardner wasn't taking his eyes from him for a single instant.

"Mr. Gardner," said Leschi to the young sailor now, "you've made a claim that this is your jacket."

"It's mine all right, sir."

"So far, so good. Now, all that's left is for you to *identify it* as yours."

A troubled expression began to rise on the sailor's face. "Well, sir, that might be tough to do. I don't have any personal possessions in the pockets. And my name isn't sewn into it. I mean, the last time I did *that*, it was my shorts and tee-shirts and I was going to camp."

"What about a sales slip?" said Leschi.

"I don't think so, sir. I mean, who keeps old sales receipts? And the specialty shop where I bought it went out of business about six months ago."

The bartender let out a derisive snigger, grinning like a cat who'd just gobbled the family canary. "An identity crisis. That's too bad, admiral. Looks as if you're going to have to scuttle that fine-looking leather jacket."

But Leschi still held a reasonably high trump to play. He took Philip Gardner aside and out of earshot of the bartender. He spoke with him a moment and was pleased to see the sailor's countenance brighten.

"Well, that's right, officer!" beamed Gardner. "I mean, all those beers and all the confusion—I completely lost sight of that possibility!"

"Thought you might have," said Leschi quietly.

He turned back to the bartender. "Pal, you may not care for this a great deal, but our Mr. Gardner here may have a pretty strong case of theft against you."

The heavyset man chuckled. But it held the false ring of lead slugs fallen on pavement. "Theft? Against *me*? Well, that'll be the neatest trick since the dead dog jumped through the hoop. Ain't *no way* Admiral Nelson here can identify this jacket as his."

"Oh, but there *may be* a way. I'll have to take this jacket along with me, because Seaman First Gardner and I have a short errand to run. And if it pans out, expect me back here to arrest you for theft. Clean your glasses and ashtrays and wipe down your tables and we'll be back in about a half-hour."

OUT ON DOCK STREET, THE FOG WAS BUILDING AROUND the ankles of the ramshackled office buildings and sleazy hotels. Leschi had the leather jacket folded over his arm as he walked with Philip Gardner towards the unmarked. A patrol car was coming at them down the street, seeming to search for its path in the thick fog. It was Hyduk, back from the Detox Center and making another swing down Dock Street. He eased up behind Leschi's unmarked, got out and leaned against the mirror post on the driver's side.

"Ah, petty theft on Dock Street," he said as Leschi and the sailor approached him. "There's so much big crime going on tonight, an officer hardly knows where to begin."

"You take what they give you," Leschi said. "Seaman Gardner and I here, for example, are bound for the Naval Training Center up at the cove. A quick little trip. Be back in a half-hour."

"Then the victim *can* identify the jacket as his," said Hyduk. "How's he going to manage that?"

Leschi lit a fresh cheroot and let a wry smile cross his lips. "Lucky for Mr. Gardner here, this jacket of his turns out to be a specialty item. Probably no two like it on the face of the earth."

"So, he doesn't follow the fashion crowd. How does that help him claim his jacket?"

"The manufacturers of specialty coats and jackets always consider one aspect of their garments to be very important," Leschi told Hyduk. "And that aspect is button replacement. An extra button is always sewn onto the garment or placed in a pocket to replace one that might become lost or fall off through wear."

Patrolman Hyduk's thick, Indian eyebrows lifted with understanding. "And Seaman Gardner here has that spare button stashed in a seabag or foot locker back at the base."

Leschi smiled as he took out the keys to the unmarked. "Button, button, who's got the button?"

"I do," Philip Gardner said as he tried unsuccessfully to keep the impishness out of his giggle. ●

It was a tough assignment—following his own father—but it was worse finding out what the man was doing!

Ross Malone: Next of Kin

by JEFF McGRAW

CIGARETTE SMOKE BILLED OUT INTO THE NIGHT AIR when Ross Malone opened the wooden door to enter the dark world of the blue collar bar.

"I want you to investigate your father. I want you to find out who's blackmailing him." Louisa Malone's words echoed in her son's mind. Sharp images throbbed at the temples of his conscience. Images of freshly gnawed fingernails with nailbeds flushed red, of her counting out his \$200 a day retainer in twenty-dollar bills from a rubberbanded roll, and of the anguish in her "No" when he asked if their marriage was under any particular strain.

She had even rejected his suggestion of using Angela Sumner instead of her own private detective son because of the personal nature of her request. "No thank you, Rossiter. I want to keep this in the Malone family, but I wouldn't want your brother or sister to find out. It would kill them."

All of her prodding led Ross to this bar on the north side of the city just past the Route 81 off ramp. It was a saloon where if you wore a tie they called you foreigner. Neon beer signs flashed from the top of the picture window frame but all too often liquored up patrons thought the pulsating red and blue tubes of light read, "Exit." Glistening shards scattered at the base of the brick building told of last night's hasty departure.

A worn leather jacket from his tenure as an investigator with the District Attorney's office helped to dull Ross Malone's image but his well scrubbed face might stand out. One wrong move and most of the bar's patrons would gladly perform facial urban renewal for him. Five minutes into the bar, his steel blue eyes adjusted to the dim interior.

There was no sign of the father he had tailed from the Onondaga Hill post office branch after his father had received a call, supposedly from

work, asking him to come in and fix a balky zip code machine. According to his mother this had become a regular pattern, up to three times a week, for the past six months and seemed more suspicious in conjunction with the methodical withdrawal of \$2,700 from his parents' joint checking account in eighteen monthly installments.

Ross' hope, and his mother's, was that it would actually turn out to be a blackmailer. Otherwise it meant the first crack in the thirty-nine year marriage of Louisa Spadafore and John Molono. The family surname had been Americanized down through the years of a marriage that had withstood depression, war, unemployment, and the rearing of three children. Ross' father had learned early that if your name was Malone instead of Molono you got better jobs, quicker promotions, and smoother sailing than the others who refused to change. And after a while you find that you can't change back even if you want to.

THE RICKETY WOODEN BAR STOOL BALANCED ROSS' 5'10" well, having been vacated by the man prone on the floor next to it, oblivious to his newfound station. Ross motioned the bartender over. The burly man had hair growing on or out of every conceivable place save for the inside of his mouth. He was the best evidence yet that Dr. Leaky was right. A forearm rested on the bar sporting a muted blue and red tattoo, "Born To Belch."

"What'll it be, mister?" squeaked the hirsute mammal.

Ross fought a smirk until he noticed the ugly two-inch scar on the bartender's neck near his Adam's apple. He ordered a Miller Lite and collected a handful of peanuts from the jar near the ashtray. Generic packaging at its best. Even squinting, his irritated eyes didn't help Ross locate his father through the low hanging gray haze.

Suddenly that bearish presence crept into view. Back booth, far left, a lone flickering candle on an aluminum pie plate illuminating that familiar ruddy complexion that owed itself to high blood pressure. Ross melted into the sweat-stained paneling to reduce the chances of his father seeing him. There was no need to worry about John Malone's wandering eyes. All of his attention was focused on the auburn haired woman across the table from him, her sweatered, v-shaped back towards the detective.

The pit of his stomach waved good-bye and he battled the urge to rub his knuckles into his father's Italian features. His next two beers became boilermakers shifting his senses into neutral. "Turn around, lady," he said half aloud to no one in particular.

From his vantage point at the far end of the mahogany bar strewn with ashes, peanut shells, and faces Ross could tell their conversation

was animated and that his father was getting more upset with each passing moment. The sweater placed a well-manicured hand over Johnny Malone's fidgeting fingers. A wedding ring flashed its presence through the meager light. It was bad enough, Ross fumed, that his father had to cheat on his mother but did he have to do it with a married woman?

An envelope from his father's inside jacket pocket made a brief appearance towards the end of the conversation. It looked large enough to hold \$150 in small, unmarked, used bills. Was this another payoff? Ross chugged the last of his fourth boilermaker and started towards the illicit couple. No father of his was going to pay blackmail. Not if his son could help it.

Slightly teetering, Ross left the stool to maneuver through the crowd now thickened with two local softball teams toasting their tournament wins in sweatpants and spikes. Halfway back John Anthony Malone spotted his son approaching. Panic speared his face and he bolted for the rear exit. Ross pressed forward, jostling infielders and outfielders alike in his haste to reach his father. Beer splashed all around him. A hand on his shoulder, fleshy bone collided with and collapsed his aquiline nose. Down went the body, out went the lights.

SOFT, SCENTED, CRUSHED VELVET~CRADLED HIS LIMP, aching body. Ammonia fumes pierced his swollen nostrils, jolting the private detective to reality. Persistent blinking slowly eased his blurred vision and the first thing he focused on was the auburn-haired woman sitting alongside him on the edge of the sofa, a damp washcloth resting on his head that rocked with spasm after spasm. Ross mentally pinched himself.

"Welcome to the living. For a time there I thought you had left a wake-up call for next year," said the woman in her early thirties and well known to Ross Malone and his father.

"Don't tempt me. How did I get here, Aunt Cassandra?"

"Some of those All-Stars who used you to wipe their feet on were kind enough to drag you out to my car."

"What made them stop?"

"You bleed easily and profusely. But the doctor said to take these pills every four hours if the pain in your nose persists." She laughed sympathetically. "You look like a raccoon that's been in a fight. And drop the Aunt Cassandra. After all, I've been married to your Uncle Vic for the last three years. And you and I are practically the same age. Just call me Cassie."

"Is that what my father calls you?" Cassie's eyes dropped and she

started to leave but his determined grip on her wrist held her near.

"Don't get involved in things you don't understand, Ross. It doesn't concern you."

"You're breaking up my parents' thirty-nine year marriage and it doesn't concern me? What's the matter, Cassie? Isn't Uncle Victor enough for you? You need more Malone men to feel fulfilled?" A firm tug on that slender wrist pulled her onto him. His left hand forced her resistant mouth to his. Their lips made a violent rendezvous that ceased as soon as Ross realized he couldn't breathe through his fractured nose.

Cassie lurched backwards, swiping a free hand at his head and scraping her long fingernails off his swollen nose, beet red under the lone bandaid that tore loose in the process. Ross yelped like a scolded puppy.

"Get out of here," she screamed. "Now!"

Ross rolled from the couch to the floor then stood unevenly, blood trickling from each nostril. He staggered towards the door, disdaining a look back when he spoke.

"Just stay away from my father or I'll have a talk with Uncle Vic."

Cassie fired a parting salvo at the closing apartment door. "Don't give me orders, Ross Malone. It's not what you think and if you were half the detective you think you are you'd pull your mind out of the gutter and find out the truth."

"IT ONLY HURTS WHEN I BREATHE, BUT YOU DIDN'T COME here to discuss my nose, mom."

"I want to unhire you. Stop your investigation," ordered Louisa Malone attired in her funeral best replete with dual rosary beads working overtime. "Keep the rest of the money I gave you."

"Fired by my own mother? Okay I'll stop. You'll want to know what I've found out so far."

"No."

"What's happened? Twenty-four hours ago you came in here wanting me to nail pop to the cross."

"Don't blaspheme, Rossiter. Your father explained everything. I don't require your services any longer."

"What did he say?"

"That's personal. Children shouldn't interfere in their parents' affairs. I'll see you Sunday at one for dinner. Be prompt." With that, his mother swept from his office like an avenging angel who had just completed her mission. Ross was confused and curious. Money wasn't the issue. He didn't like the idea of somebody pushing his parents around whether it be a blackmailer . . . or a mistress.

The question remained as to what was his next move. Ross had to find out what the big secret was and he was certain his mother wouldn't tell him. If his mother wouldn't tell her private detective, she might tell her priest.

FATHER EMERY BERNARD PASSED AWAY LAST YEAR AND the church had seen fit to replace him with a younger man, Father Chester Shelton. Ross found him shooting baskets in the rec center gym late that same afternoon.

"Do you play basketball, Mr. Malone? Care for a game of PIG?"

"I've been known to dribble in my sleep," said Ross, leaving his shoes against the padded gym wall in respect for the newly waxed floor.

Chet the Jet, as he called himself, sank his first shot from the top of the circle while Ross' try rimmed the hoop and fell aside.

"That's the father," intoned the priest in his best pulpit tones.

"Pardon me?"

"House rules. Instead of P-I-G, I use the father, son, and the holy ghost. Now what is the problem you mentioned over the phone?"

Ross outlined his dilemma with his father's possible extortion and his mother's turnabout in firing him. The game continued.

"I don't know how I can help you. I've only been in town a year and it takes time to earn the trust of the parishioners. Your mother hasn't seen fit to confide in me. Sorry. That's the father and the son. My turn."

SATURDAY SLIPPED UP ON ROSS MALONE WHILE HE SPENT the balance of the week agonizing over his next course of action. After cleaning up overdue paperwork at the office he headed west of the city to visit Grandmother Molono at Kirkland out on Route 175.

A quick stop for lemon sherbet stalled his arrival at the nursing home past lunch. He found his father's mother upright in bed wearing the handmade blue knit shawl over her white linen gown while the sun bathed her slight frame from behind.

Her drawn and wrinkled mouth creased into a smile when Ross appeared. Grandmother had seen eighty last spring and each day she experienced towards her next birthday mystified her doctors. As always, Ross' grandmother knew when things were out of sync.

"Such a long face for a young man. Is your whole family out of sorts this week? First your mother and father sound like the voice of doom and now you. Is it such a bother to visit your grandmother?"

"Of course not." Ross always felt he was twelve years old when talking to his grandmother and that she could read his mind at will. "I

wouldn't want to burden you with it. You've been through enough in your lifetime what with coming to America from Italy nine months pregnant with dad and having to deliver him yourself not two weeks after you'd landed in New York. No, grandma, the trouble is nothing I can't handle."

"And you handle blackmail every day?"

Ross was stunned. She had known all along. His father must have told her. Well if she knew her son, his father, was being blackmailed then she might also know why. He asked. She directed him to the top drawer of her metal dresser built into the wall and a diary that she opened to 14 March 1930 and handed the well-worn book to her grandson.

"That captain says that we are still four full sailing days from America and our new start. Four days until my baby can be born an American citizen. I pray he'll be able to wait just a few more days," it read, the black ink trailing downward on the yellowed page, another entry scrawled under the same date below. "He is so strong and will make a fine son. Both his father and I are proud of him. I'd only wished he'd waited."

Ross looked up. "So Dad was born on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic to Italian parents." She nodded. "Then he's not an American citizen. But why would somebody care whether or not a fifty-four-year-old postal service employ—. A fifty-four-year-old civil service employee who everyone thinks is an American citizen and who lied about it on his application."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Molono. Time for your medication. Hello, Mr. Malone. Glad to see you again," chirped Ernest, grandmother's counselor and orderly ever since she was admitted to Kirkland seven years ago. "I see you've brought some more sherbet. I'll see that it's put in the freezer. Remember, visiting hours are over in fifteen minutes."

With a flourish of his good arm, Ernest left with the melting confection. He'd been a high school All-American before a drunk driver shattered the left arm that George Steinbrenner had drooled over. Now Ernest was a good listener, strong back, a sympathetic shoulder, and just another coming attraction that never premiered.

"NOW THAT WE BOTH KNOW THAT I KNOW EVERYTHING, let me take care of this blackmailer once and for all."

"You're too late, Ross. Your father's gone to do it."

"What? Where?"

"The blackmailer called and told your father there had to be one

final payment of \$5,000. Your father's gone to meet him at Coyne Field."

Traffic, though stop and go, was sparse and Ross made good time getting to Coyne Field. A high school soccer game dominated the artificial turf and the attention of the few hundred spectators around the bleachers and the sidelines. Ross started at the north end, moving quickly among the crowd scanning each face for his father. No luck. He headed for the refreshment tent on the far side when his father appeared next to the column of syrup canisters behind the snack bar. The private detective maneuvered into position where he could both watch his father and get to him in the shortest possible time.

By 6:30 the game had been over for thirty minutes and the place barren of extraneous bodies. John Anthony Malone remained, checking his watch at thirty-second intervals. Ross was just about to collect his father when a 6'2½" black trenchcoat materialized over there, a rainhat pulled low over the wearer's eyes.

Once the bulky envelope exchanged hands Ross broke into a fast trot towards the men, gauging how to protect his nose if the trenchcoat wanted to fight. His feet moved faster than his brain and hurled his body sideways into the blackmailer as his father watched in astonishment. During the scuffle Ross shrieked each time his nose was bumped. It sounded like punk rock. Ultimately Ross jerked his Smith and Wesson from its belted holster and jabbed it towards the trenchcoat's face.

"Hold it or I'll fix your nose to look just like mine." The cold steel barrel pressed against the stubby nose proved his point. The struggle was over. His free hand exposed the hidden face. Ernest glared upwards from the ground under Ross' knee.

"Just one more payment. I wouldn't have asked for any more. He's got it. I heard his mother say her son in the post office is making money hand over fist. And he's not even one of us. I've lived here my whole life, not like the sleazebag who did this to me. My whole career was ruined and the guy who did this to me just got deported. I've paid for his mistake every day since. I needed that money. It was for my future. I don't want to stay at that stinking nursing home forever. What happens when I get older?"

"Don't sweat it, Ernie," said Ross standing up. "You're going to a place that's got a great retirement plan. Dad, go call the police."

THE RIDE HOME TWO HOURS LATER PROVIDED TIME TO get all of the blanks filled in.

"I'm telling you, dad, that all Ernest wanted was a cheap way to

score. He'd read grandma's diary so he knew you weren't a citizen. And she liked to brag about her successful son, but Ernest failed to realize that even the wages of a civil servant seem extravagant to a poor immigrant woman who took in wash on a daily basis to put food on the table."

"Does your nose still hurt?"

"A little. Now please tell me where Cassie, uh Aunt Cassandra fits in to all of this?"

"When the blackmailer called first I had to talk to someone but your Uncle Victor was out of town. So I told Cassandra and she spent many an evening trying to get me to tell your mother all about it."

"You met with Cassie all of those times you sneaked out of the house?"

"Except for the time I had to pay off Ernest every two weeks."

"You know that mom thought the worst."

John Anthony Malone nodded, his frowning face spotlighted by the passing street lights. "I know. When I got this last call, I told her everything including about your Aunt Cassandra. I just couldn't keep it in any more. I know it was the right thing to arrest him but now it'll be all over the papers and I'll lose my job."

"Maybe not. C'mon, dad, there's a judge I want you to meet."

"UPON HEARING THE FACTS IN THE CASE, U.S. DISTRICT
Court Judge Karen Salloran issued a finding asking the Department of Immigration and Naturalization to speed up John Anthony Malone's petition for citizenship. Case closed." Ross paused from dictating long enough to down a large gulp of Pepsi. "Note: Deliver a case of Chivas Regal to aforementioned Karen Salloran . . . Note: Order florist to continue weekly delivery of long stemmed roses to Cassie Malone until further notice."

Another pause was interrupted in mid-gulp by the approaching high pitched tones of his mother.

"How dare you send me a six-page itemized bill!"

"Mom, it was just a joke," he now regretted playing.

"Look at this. \$4.50 for bullets. You never even fired that peashooter of yours. Clint Eastwood would be embarrassed to carry a toy gun like that."

Ross Malone turned his mother out behind his standard bland smile and wondered what this letter from the William Morris Talent Agency marked "Important" was doing in his morning mail. ●

At dinner, Adrian arrived simultaneously at dessert and the solution to his problem: he would have to kill the man who stood in his way!

A Classic Crime

by CECILY NABORS

ADRIAN ST. CLAIR, EDITOR OF *AESTHETE MAGAZINE*, SMILED with approval as he read the latest poem submitted by Raddclyffe Wynters, the celebrated recluse from Amherst.

Mighty Zeus, transfixed by Love's gold dark,
Espied young Danae's nymphlike grace.
This king, now slave, in gold shower descending
Embraces mortal maid for glorious hour unending.
What is he but an actor playing a part
Unmindful of the look on Hera's face.

St Clair laid the single sheet of paper lovingly on his desk, lost in reverie. He had spent years cultivating writers like Wynters, whose work would, through the carefully-crafted influence of *Aesthete*, usher in the new age of classicism, the new era of beauty and grace.

The phone rang, its discordant noise dissolving the rosy mists hovering round the temples on Olympus. The voice of Sol Herman, the new publisher, brayed into Adrian's ear.

"Hey, creampuff! Get your ass in here pronto. All that artsy-schmartsy crap is out. I've decided Washington needs its own sports mag, so effective immediately we're publishing one. I'm calling it *Jock's Journal*."

The publisher's phone crashed into its cradle in a mere echo of the

crushing impact of his words. *Jock's Journal!* The mind didn't boggle; it jelled solid. Dazed, Adrian stared unseeingly at the wall that divided his office from Herman's. Not just that wall, but two millennia separated them. Surely the mythic sisters who weave men's destinies had erred in allowing their threads to become entangled.

Adrian's shaking hand extracted a Dunhill from his silver cigarette case. Through the smoke of his first long exhalation, he looked at the sheet of paper on his desk. Hope gleamed briefly through clouds of despair. The Greeks and Romans had revered the athletic pursuits as another example of the arts. Perhaps it was possible that Herman could yet be persuaded to maintain a classical balance.

He entered the publisher's office, wincing at the mess it had become in the two weeks since Sol had made his appearance. A haze of cigar smoke hung in the air. Cheerleader posters littered the paneled walls once graced by paintings of the Parthenon and the Coliseum, and the bronze caryatid in the corner wore a Washington Redskins' cap tilted at a rakish angle over her eyes, which were downcast as if in embarrassment. Adrian repressed a shudder.

"Mr. Herman," he said, still nobly resolved to give the man slouching behind the desk the benefit of some doubt, "I have just received the poem that will make our magazine famous." Without waiting for his hearer's astonished look to fade, Adrian read, in his finest declamatory style, Wynters's newest gem.

Herman's fist slammed down on the desk top, dislodging several empty beer cans. His bulging stomach strained at his shirt buttons as he leaned forward, the tufts of black hair protruding from his nose and ears seeming to quiver with rage. "I don't give a damn," he barked, "if that Danny had history's classiest ass. What kind of magazine do you think I'm publishing?" He stared St. Clair up and down, from the well-cut hair past the custom-tailored suit and silk tie to the pointed Italian shoes. Then he shrugged scornfully. "Ah, hell, your private life don't mean diddly-squat to me. But get this straight, baby—I'm quarterbacking the game now, and the old man's money will buy me any editor I want. The first edition of *Jock's Journal* comes out in three months. Dump that trash and hustle me up some sports stories or your own ass will be bouncing on the street."

ADRIAN FUMED ALONG A SMOLDERING FUSE TO HIS OFFICE, pausing only to pick up his topcoat. There was no hope. The man was a total Philistine, ready to douse the beacon of civilization in a cesspool. He wheeled his silver BMW angrily through lunchtime traffic in Georgetown, taking perverse satisfaction in stealing the last parking

space on M Street from a Cadillac. Finally he settled at his favorite table in his favorite bistro with an explosive sigh that brought Maurice the headwaiter hovering deferentially.

The bottle of Pouilly-Fuisse that accompanied his creamy crab Imperial seemed to both soothe his agitation and sharpen his wits, polished by years of the most rigorous investigation into *the best*. Compromise had never been a possibility. Left a modest living by his father, St. Clair had devoted his life to the pursuit of elegance, refinement, and good taste, and the enlightenment of other seekers from the podium of *Aesthete*. He had not dreamed that the old man, Sol's uncle, would hand over the reins to his hairy Neanderthal nephew, to drive as he saw fit. And that hell-bent course would destroy the most important thing in Adrian St. Clair's life.

Adrian frowned at the tablecloth. He had arrived simultaneously at dessert and the only way *Aesthete Magazine* could be saved. Sol Herman had to be removed.

As he rolled the exquisite rhubarb sherbet appreciatively on his tongue, Adrian considered his decision. Analyzing his feelings as he analyzed a poem, a piece of music, or the delicate balance between rhubarb, lemon, and sugar, he was pleased to discover no tacky moral repugnance at the notion of a necessary murder. Since he lacked the means to finance the magazine himself, there really was no other way. Arguing with the old man would be pointless. The magazine had never been anything but a tax shelter to him, and Sol, newly out of the service, was the last of his family.

Without Sol, the old man would no doubt be as pliable as Danae, soft clay to be shaped by the will of Zeus. Yes, it was clear that sister Atropos merely had to be assisted in cutting Sol's thread early from the loom.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS ST. CLAIR WAS SELDOM IN HIS OFFICE. Mr. Herman, assured that his editor was out lining up photographers and background material and arranging interviews with various sports stars, had been heard to whinny with laughter at the ease and completeness of his victory.

In fact, Adrian's researches concerned the gentle art of murder.

Knowing nothing of a genre he had considered inane and unliterary, he solicited from friends the names of their favorite mysteries and read them avidly, seeking the perfect *modus operandi*. He eliminated several popular ones quite rapidly, there being no vicarage or private library he could reasonably kill Sol in, nor a certainty of a long peal being rung in the Washington Cathedral. Arsenic seemed a good deal less obtainable

here than in English villages, and he did not know how to tamper with brakes or shoot a gun.

Some of the "hardboiled" types appealed to him, once he became familiar with the jargon, for their cynical, everybody's-on-the-take and what's-another-deader attitudes confirmed him in his purpose. Briefly, he considered hiring a "hit man" to kill Sol for him, but the expense, plus his inability to protect himself from his own employee should something go wrong, deterred him. Besides, according to the books, hit men were always squealing or welshing or copping a plea.

As his vocabulary broadened, his resolve to play a lone hand stiffened. He would be the dauntless single-combat hero, preserving the decencies against the slavering barbarian. Perseus versus Medusa, Theseus against the Minotaur.

But the method eluded him. He decided finally that his ties to his previously unruffled elegant existence were limiting his conceptions in this new endeavor. He must detach himself, create temporarily a new persona whose modes of thought more closely matched those of the coarse and appalling Sol. *Know your victim*, he thought, *and that knowledge shall set you free*. Like Zeus, he would transform himself, achieve his goal, and then like any good actor resume his normal mien. He had no Hera to mock or rail, no drama critic to cavil. Only he, and one other, could ever judge the sensitivity of his performance.

During one of his long absences from work, ostensibly interviewing a Redskin wide receiver, he bought some secondhand work pants and a shirt, a disreputable coat, and some battered shoes that were almost his size. Back at his apartment he costumed himself, his nose wrinkling fastidiously at the clinging musty scent of age and stale beer. The trousers, too short for his long legs, flapped above his ankles, revealing artistically dirtied white socks. He remembered to take off his expensive watch, and regretfully substituted a pack of cheap cigarettes for his silver-cased Dunhills.

When he was finished, he went to his gold-framed cheval glass and nearly recoiled from his own image. With a wry smile, he studied his appearance critically. One last change was necessary. Hooding sharp eyes with drooping lids, he allowed his mouth to hang slack. The transformation was complete. He left his apartment and slunk down the carpeted hall past the elevators to the service stairs. He was ready to rub patched elbows with the *hoi polloi*.

THREE DAYS LATER, THOUGH HIS VOCABULARY HAD BECOME ASTONISHINGLY LARGER AND HIS NOSE LESS FASTIDIOUS, ADRIAN HAD STILL NOT DECIDED HOW TO KILL SOL. THAT THE MAN MUST DIE HAD BECOME

increasingly clear; indeed, it was a wonder that he'd been suffered to live this long. As the whole office area now reeked of Sol's cheap cigars, so his influence pervaded and soiled everything. After painful experience, the secretaries had taken to sitting down suddenly when Sol approached, or standing with their backs to the wall, and even the youngest had ceased blushing at his innuendo-laden comments on their Saturday nights. The managing editor complained to the other staff about Sol's long and expensive "business lunches" with cheerleaders. The once-composed atmosphere roiled like storm clouds.

Sol's voice could be heard braying for Adrian more and more frequently as the days went by. "Hey, creampuff!"—the phrase preceded all Sol's grunting questions—"where the hell've you been? What kind of trashy story is this?" The pages were thrust in Adrian's face, accompanied by a noisome spurt of cigar smoke. "Don't gimme this 'equine beauty' crap. That little horse-ass jockey is on the take. Get the story!"

Most humiliating of all was being forced to write a letter to Raddclyffe Wynters, explaining the circumstance of rejection. *Jock's Journal!* His soul crawled with mortification.

The day would come, though, when the "creampuff" would splatter all over the man's sneering face, Adrian thought viciously as he roamed the city streets. Burgers and Coke were now his elegant lunch, the street corner his bistro. In the evenings he slid through sleazy strip-joint neon neighborhoods, his mind making notes of alleys and opportunities, his senses revolted. *Aesthete* seemed more than ever a beacon of calm classic grace, needed to balance this sewer existence.

At night, when a hot shower had expunged his role and he sat with his Bach, his Dunhills, and a snifter of fine brandy, he read mysteries eagerly. Lamplight reflected softly from the gold lettering on neglected leather-bound books as Adrian devoured stacks of paperbacks. Apart from seeking ideas, he found himself actually enjoying the books, with their subtle logic, their elegant sleight-of-hand plots. He read police procedurals to find out how not to incriminate himself, but it was the classic mystery that charmed him (naturally). The many clues, the variety of characters, the devious twining paths to the heart of the matter—why, each book was a veritable labyrinth. And he was to be Theseus, who had slain the Minotaur aided by a roll of . . . string? Yarn? Thread, that was it.

That was it! Adrian sat up straight. String, thread, wire. A garotte. Clean, quick, and deadly. It might almost be a book title, he mused, looking at the stack beside him. Quickly he shuffled through to find the book in which the detective had discoursed so learnedly on the art of

strangulation. Adrian nodded as he read. Taller than the bull-built Sol, he would have leverage as well as surprise on his side. A few seconds of pressure on the carotid artery and the worst would be over. And no one would associate the elegant Mr. St. Clair with street-corner crime.

Exhilaration unexpectedly surged through him, as if the excitement and release of his pending action had made him more alive. With enhanced senses, he heard the delicate notes of the Bach variation turn to liquid crystal, saw the individual hairs on the backs of his hands curve as he tightened his fingers on the arms of his chair. His Zeus-like transformation had brought him this power, this life. And it would give *Aesthete* back to him.

THE SOONER, THE BETTER. HE SPENT THE NEXT MORNING in his office, fiercely cleansing his desk of jockish accretions. His wastebasket was filled with crumpled notes on running shoes and coils of taped interviews hanging helplessly from their cassettes when Adrian repaired to his favorite bistro for lunch. A celebratory bottle of Dom Perignon accompanied his chicken breast with truffles, a feast he felt he richly deserved. There would be time enough later for Aristotle's moderation.

Returning from lunch, he stopped at the publisher's office. "Mr. Herman," he began in a hesitant tone (Zeus wasn't the only one who could act), "I'm trying to set up an interview with the heavyweight champion, but I'm a little concerned. His agent wants a lot of money."

"Money, schmoney." Sol waved aside crass considerations. "An interview with Ricardo? When?"

"We're supposed to discuss terms tonight, downtown, someplace where he's not likely to be recognized. But it's not a very cultured neighborhood, Mr. Herman, and I was wondering if you'd care to accompany me."

Herman's scornful laughter at Adrian's cowardice could not conceal the eager expression in his eyes. His very ear tufts were quivering like antennae. "Sure, creampuff, I'll be your damn bodyguard. Two of them, two of us, right? Want I should bring you a pair of brass knucks?"

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Herman," said Adrian coldly. "We'll meet on the corner of 14th and K, at eight o'clock."

He left the office and bought some picture wire at a hardware store. He would leave nothing to chance. In his apartment, he practiced throwing the wire over a standing lamp padded with pillows until he was satisfied that his motions were as fast and skilled as Nureyev's. Loop, pull, squeeze. The bright line of the wire would draw *Aesthete*

back from the dangerous edge.

DRESSED IN THE COSTUME OF HIS NEW ALTER-EGO, A cloth cap pulled low over his eyes, Adrian was at the rendezvous early. A little chill wind sought out the holes in his shabby clothes. Just one more shivering, furtive denizen of the streets, he slouched in a doorway, watching the strobes of the neon signs flickering their garish hues over winos, strip-tease touts, and street corner dope transactions. When he saw Sol approaching, his collar pulled up against the cold and his expression a little apprehensive despite his tough talk, Adrian could not resist displaying his acting prowess. Holding out one gloved hand, he whined, "Could you spare seventy-five cents, mister? I lost my wallet and I need bus fare home."

"Beat it, creep, I hate panhandlers." Sol brushed brusquely past him. Then he did a classic double-take and spun around. "Creampuff!" he barked.

Adrian grabbed his arm. "Down here, Mr. Herman," he urged, before the man could say anything more that might be overheard. He pulled him toward a narrow alley beside a liquor store.

Herman removed his cigar and once again stared Adrian up and down. "Say, that's quite a get-up," he said admiringly. "I bet you come down here sometimes looking for a little cheap fast action, right, baby? I guess I was wrong about you."

Adrian stared at him. What mental garbage can was the cur rooting around in now?

Herman swayed his hips suggestively and laughed. Adrian's stomach turned. His fingers clenched on the wire in his pocket. "You were wrong about me," he agreed quietly.

Herman looked around the garbage-strewn alley nervously. "Where's this meeting place? Where's Ricardo?"

"In the next block," said Adrian, pointing down the alley. "But I have a contract here—I thought you'd like to read it first."

Grumbling about the darkness of the alley, Sol took the offered piece of paper and held it up toward the light from the street, just as Adrian had planned. In a flash the wire was over his head. "Aagh!" Sol croaked, thrashing wildly. The wire had caught one corner of his upturned coat collar, which protected his throat and kept Adrian from finishing the deed quickly. He held on for dear life and *Aesthete*, but Sol was heavy and strong. His hands raked frantically at the wire, and his flailing elbow caught Adrian sharply in the stomach. The editor gasped in pain and relaxed his grip. One end of the wire slid through his hand.

Gurgling incoherent curses, Sol pulled away. He stumbled out of the alley, the wire sliding down his body. Desperately, St. Clair followed him, pleading again for seventy-five cents in case anyone should notice them. His mind floundered through panic and muddled sensory impressions to focus on one thing—a large yellow object looming into view on his left.

As Herman looked back over his shoulder at Adrian pursuing like one of the Furies, he began to run. Adrian grabbed the trailing end of the wire and pulled it sharply against Sol's legs. Sol staggered, threw his hands up, and fell forward into the street.

There was a squeal of brakes and a dull thud. Sol had fallen into the path of the oncoming Metrobus. He was dead. Above his sprawled form, a sign exhorted him to love the Redskins or leave town.

ADRIAN LEANED AGAINST A PARKED CAR FOR A MOMENT to allow his churning stomach to quieten. He drew a deep, liberated breath. "So long, Sol, *baby*," he exulted silently. He gazed at the late publisher, resisting the impulse to claim the head of his victim and brandish it as Danae's son Perseus had done with Medusa's. Instead he indicated the wire to the distraught bus driver. "That must have tripped him," he volunteered. "It's criminal, what people leave on the streets."

As more people gathered, Adrian quietly slid away. He picked up the faked contract from the alley and stuffed it into his coat pocket. Deliberately he ground Sol's cigar under his heel before he headed for the nearest subway station, suddenly having no desire to take a bus.

The cold night air was as intoxicating as icy champagne bubbling in his veins. Murder was easy, after all. He and Atropos might just form a long-term partnership. There were many people the world would be well rid of—the cretinous wine steward at *Chez Jacques*, for example.

Ideas, that's all it took. Ideas, and the will to carry them out. He had the will, and he knew where to get the ideas.

Tomorrow he would tender his condolences to the old man, Sol's uncle, and offer magnanimously to stay on as editor of *Aesthete*. "And by the way," he would say, "I have a suggestion for a new magazine. A mystery magazine."

Yes. Ideas for safe (and perhaps less athletic) murders would come to him every day over the transom. He smiled. *Adrian St. Clair's Mystery Magazine*. It had the authentic ring of classical simplicity. ●

Extraordinary times called for extraordinary efforts—and stranded for six weeks on a frozen mountainside was certainly one of those times!

The Providers

by VIRGINIA LONG

I SAW DR. WILHELM THE MINUTE I WALKED INTO THE RESTAURANT. We'd never been really close friends—more like close acquaintances—and I doubt if I would have gone over to speak to him if his hadn't been the first familiar face I'd seen since I returned from a year of voluntary exile.

As I approached the table where he sat nursing a drink, he looked up expectantly. His glance touched my face, went past me to the entrance, then snapped back in recognition. He lurched to his feet, hand outstretched.

“Dave Barber! It’s been a long time.”

“Hello, Doc. It has that.” We shook hands and he motioned me to a chair opposite him, signalling to a waiter.

“What will you have?” His words were precise and lightly accented.

“Make it a double scotch,” I said. “I need it after a session with my publisher.”

“Your publisher?” He blinked at me owlishly from behind round,

gold-rimmed glasses. "Then you finally wrote the book."

"Had to bury myself in a little town in Austria for a year to do it, but it's done."

"Wonderful, wonderful!" He beamed at me so proudly it made me feel a little uncomfortable. I still have some doubts about my own talent, and have a superstitious hangup about discussing work that's not in print yet. I changed the subject.

"What have you been doing for the past year or so?"

He set his drink down and stared at me incredulously. "You don't know? You haven't read about it?"

Oh, Lord, I thought. He's won the Nobel prize for medicine or something. "Doc, I haven't read about *anything*. I've been holed up in a little cabin in Carinthia, without a newspaper, a radio or even a telephone, for over a year. I just got back to New York three days ago and you're the first person I've exchanged more than three words with except for an editor and two secretaries."

"Oh." He looked down at his glass, moving it carefully in wide, wet circles on the table.

I waited a minute, and when he didn't say anything, I asked, "What didn't I read about? Something big?"

He looked past me again, his eyes searching the restaurant's foyer, but when he spoke they fixed on me almost accusingly. "It is a rather painful subject, but— Do you recall that I was planning to invest in a business venture in Alaska?"

I nodded, trying to remember any details of it. He made an abrupt sweeping movement with his hand, as if to indicate that it didn't matter.

"There were five of us involved, and we decided to fly up there and take a look at things before making a final decision. There were five of us," he repeated, "plus the pilot."

HE LIFTED HIS GLASS, FOUND IT EMPTY AND ORDERED another drink from the waiter who was just placing mine in front of me. He went on, "It was November, just short of a year ago. Not the ideal time to be going to Alaska, but it was a time when all of us could spare the few days to make the trip. I have never known exactly what went wrong—unexpected bad weather, a faulty compass, a number of things. We were all sitting in the passenger compartment and, aside from some rather severe turbulence, we were unaware of any problem until the pilot put his head through the curtain from the cockpit to tell us to buckle up and be prepared for anything."

"Where were you by that time?" I asked, shocked by the bleakness

that had come into his eyes and the way his hand had tightened around his glass.

"Over the emptiest, most God-forsaken country in the world. We were in the northeast corner of British Columbia, four hundred miles off course, in heavy clouds over the Canadian Rockies, with ice building up on the wings. We broke through a hole in the clouds, and the pilot saw a mountain ridge directly ahead, with no chance to climb over it." He took a quick, convulsive drink and stared at me almost as if asking me to stop his narration. I was waiting expectantly, so he went on.

"There was a broad ledge a few hundred feet long to the right and below us, and he made the decision to land the airplane there. It at least offered some hope of survival, and if he had climbed back into the clouds there would have been virtually no chance of avoiding one of the peaks that were all around us."

I whistled, feeling a sudden touch of the terror that must have gripped them then. "Hobson's choice."

"Yes, but he did a fine job. We went in with the landing gear up, skidded for some distance over the rocky surface and then cartwheeled to a stop. Aside from some minor cuts and abrasions, none of us was injured. I had my medical bag along, containing my instruments and a good supply of medical supplies, so there was no difficulty in treating the injuries. It gave me something to do besides brood over the predicament we found ourselves in."

"It must have been pretty cold that time of year," I said, and then felt a little foolish for stating the obvious.

"Like a deep freeze. So the first things we had to worry about were shelter and fire. Fortunately, the cabin of the airplane was almost intact and we had brought heavy clothing. The wings had snapped off when we cartwheeled, so we propped them up on either side of the door to the cabin, laced tree branches across the top and packed them with snow, thus forming a sheltered tunnel leading to the cabin itself. There was no shortage of firewood. We were on a sort of terrace which sloped at an angle of ten or fifteen degrees, and there was a stand of timber along the upper side which had obviously suffered a forest fire a few years before. Most of the trees were dead, some still standing but many fallen. We dragged a dozen or more of the smaller ones over near our shelter to provide a convenient stockpile in case rescue was delayed and we became unable to gather firewood."

"Good thinking," I commented.

He ignored me. "Then each day we would bring in enough more for that day's needs. I can honestly say that we never suffered from the

cold. We kept a large fire burning the entire time we were there. We never let it go out, because we had only one lighter and a few matches among us. Aside from the warmth, the fire kept our spirits up and we thought the smoke would be seen by searchers. We tramped out an SOS in the snow and then settled down to wait until we were found. We never doubted that we would be found."

"What about food?"

"There was an emergency kit in the airplane. Some hard candy, a few pieces of jerky, a fishing line and a booklet with directions for making snares to catch birds and small game." He smiled, a tight bitter smile.

"Doesn't sound like much."

"It wasn't. Especially when you consider that the only stream within the area we were able to reach was frozen over, and the only game we saw the entire time was a mountain goat several hundred yards away. We had no weapons, but we were optimistic enough to fashion a spit from an antenna and the landing gear's manual crank." His gaze moved again to the door as a small group of people came in, then came back to me again.

"So what did you live on? Or were you rescued pretty quickly?"

"Not for six weeks and four days."

"Over six weeks on a little hard candy and some jerky? Unbelievable!"

"Oh, there was a little more. Someone had an orange, and there was a chocolate bar and two small bags of salted peanuts. And to melt snow for drinking water we bent metal from the tail assembly into a large basin-like affair."

"That sounds a little better. But still, six weeks! Why did it take them so long to find you?"

"We learned later that an air search was started the next morning, but we were far from where they expected us to be. It was quite intensive, but was called off after two weeks."

"Well, you're obviously little the worse for the experience." I studied his square face and erect shoulders. "Did all the others survive?"

"Yes, we all survived." There was a shifting darkness deep in his eyes. "As a matter of fact, I am here today to meet the others. A reunion of survivors. Perhaps if you have time, you would like to meet them."

That explained the frequent glances toward the door. Restraining an urge to look that direction myself, I asked, "Tell me how you all managed to live through it."

HE HAD SPREAD HIS HANDS FLAT ON THE TABLE ON either side of his glass, and I found myself studying the delicate surgeon's fingers that contrasted so strangely with his bulky body and the Aryan militancy of his posture.

He sighed and lowered his hands to his lap. "As I said, there were five of us and the pilot, and the meager supply of food was exhausted in a few days. I had more or less assumed leadership, merely by virtue of caring for the injuries and perhaps because I had organized the flight in the first place. So when I suggested a method of survival, it was accepted by the group."

"What was it? Collecting moss and beetles? Snakes, grubs, bird eggs? I've heard people will eat anything when they get hungry enough."

He met my eyes impassively. "I simply suggested that we proceed in alphabetical order, with each man to provide food for one week until we were rescued. It was no more than coincidence that it worked out so precisely. The pilot, whose name was Sam Abbott, was first. He readily agreed, as he felt some measure of responsibility for our misfortune."

"I take it he came up with something."

"Yes, indeed. Each contributed equally well in his turn. Of course there were differences in the quality of the offerings, but I was particularly proud of Sam. He was the first, so it was more difficult for him." His smile was a little sad as he added, "He is a tough, wiry little man—small but quite willing to do his share."

He unwrapped a cigar, sniffed it appreciatively, then lit it and puffed rapidly for a moment. "Then Walter. Walter Flaherty, the youngest of our group. He is not tall, but well-built and broad-shouldered, strong as a bull. He did quite well by us."

"Did he somehow bag that mountain goat?"

Dr. Wilhelm went on as if I had not spoken. "Then it was Bill Lorimer's turn. He is a big, good-looking man of approximately your age. In his prime, one might say."

"Surely not after six weeks on that mountainside."

"Oh, naturally we all lost weight. Quite a lot of weight. But we did survive." He said it with grim satisfaction.

"That's the important thing," I agreed.

"Dave Perry was the provider for our fourth week. Good man, Dave—tall, slim, muscular. Getting on toward sixty, but keeps himself in shape. He's always been a physical fitness buff. Even now—" His voice trailed off.

"No lasting effects from all that then. That's good."

"Well, I would not say that. But Ansel Richardson took over when

Dave's week was up. A good friend of mine, a pediatrician." He chuckled fondly. "Ansel looks like a baby himself—fat and rosy-cheeked. He was only a little less fat and rosy when we were picked up."

I yielded to a sudden impatience. "Damn it, Doc, what did all these guys find to eat? You've already said there wasn't much of anything there."

"Extraordinary times call for extraordinary efforts. Each man performed heroically." His mouth set into a prim line and there was reproach in his voice.

I gave up. After a quick mental count, I said, "And you were the last provider."

"Yes." He shifted awkwardly in his chair. "We were sighted by the pilot of a commercial airliner, who saw sunlight reflected from the metal wreckage and notified the proper authorities. We were picked up by a helicopter late that afternoon."

"Wow! That helicopter must have been the most beautiful sight you ever saw."

"Indeed it was. When they lowered the stretchers—"

"Stretchers? But I understood you to say—well, naturally you would all have been pretty weak by then."

"There were—" He paused. "There were certain disabilities we all shared. All of us." He said the last with a strange sort of pride.

BEFORE I COULD ASK ANYTHING ELSE, DR. WILHELM looked again toward the entrance, and then struggled to his feet with a broad smile on his face. "Ah, here are the first of them now."

I watched him stride toward two men who had just come in, and as they stepped forward to meet him I suddenly put down the drink I had raised to my mouth.

I guessed from the descriptions he had given that they were Walter Flaherty and Ansel Richardson, but I didn't stay to meet them. There was no need to wait and see the other three either. I had the answer to my question now.

I knew that each of them, too, would walk with the carefully balanced, swinging gait of a man not yet quite accustomed to his artificial leg.

●

It was always the same way: point-blank range with a .22-caliber pistol. How did he do it?

Family Business

by ROBERT CITTADINO

KRESKI STOOD ON THE DESERTED STRETCH OF CALIFORNIA beach, feeling very much out of place. He had never been beyond the bustling, skyscraper environs of New York City before and now, standing in open, unfamiliar terrain, he felt exposed and vulnerable, like an animal caught away from its burrow. Adding to his discomfort, the sun beat down on him like a child's magnifying glass focused unmercifully on a bug and rivulets of perspiration ran down his face and neck as he sweltered inside his heavy, dark suit. As the seconds slowly crawled by, Kreski's mood grew more and more miserable. He scowled at the bright surroundings about him, thoroughly annoyed.

Wearily maintaining his vigil, Kreski glanced at his watch to check the time, shifted the weight on his feet, and winced. In crossing the wide expanse of beach, sand had gotten into his shoes. It felt sharp and gritty beneath his feet and he hated it. He hated the restless, tossing ocean and the electric blue sky with its chubby white clouds scuttling by overhead. He hated California and the plane flight that had brought him over from New York. But most of all, he hated the idea of what would happen to him if he didn't follow orders and keep the appointment. So, he stood there in the glare and the heat and waited.

Finally, above the beach, on the escarpment where he had parked his rented automobile, a second car pulled up beside his and was still.

Kreski watched as a small, indistinct figure, no more than a silhouette, got out of the driver's side of the car. The figure made its way down the zigzagging flights of wooden steps leading to the beach, growing larger and more detailed as it approached.

At last, some fifteen paces distant, Kreski could see that a short, compact man with a mustache, perhaps in his late forties, was walking towards him. He was dapper in appearance and dressed in light-weight, well-tailored leisure clothes suitable for the beach. The man wore sensible canvas deck shoes and, Kreski sourly noted, took such neat, controlled steps that it was doubtful that he would get any sand in them.

"Tourist," the refined man asked in a friendly, easy manner when he approached within hailing distance.

"No, I'm on business from New York. Family business. Name's Kreski," replied Kreski, as he had been instructed to do.

"This is a coincidence. I, too, am on business. Only I am from Chicago. My name is Pritkin," the other man answered.

This was the proper exchange and Kreski relaxed a bit. They had met at the right place, at the right time, and had swapped the correct phrases. At least this part of it had been concluded satisfactorily, he thought to himself.

BOTH MEN TURNED TOWARDS THE OCEAN, WHERE THE boom and swish of the waves would help cover their voices. Kreski wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. He wished he could take off his coat, but that would expose his gun and shoulder holster, so he just stood there, frying in the heat. Frustrated, he complained, "Why the hell do we have to meet way out here in California? Couldn't I have met you in Chicago, where you're based?"

"It's more secure this way," Pritkin replied in a tone that would brook no further discussion on the matter. "Now, what did you want to see me about," he asked mildly.

Kreski shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's obvious what I'm here for."

"It will be when you tell me," the fastidious man replied in the same infuriatingly calm manner.

"You know the situation in New York City," Kreski said, openly irritated. "The five families are having a power struggle. The Don Saldi Clan is becoming the largest and most powerful. Saldi wants it to be the first among equals. To get the biggest share of the pie. For himself, he wishes to be number one. He wants to secure the title of Boss of All Bosses."

"Ahh, I see," was all Pritkin offered by way of comment and then he was silent once more.

"The family I represent," Kreski continued, "has been the hardest hit. We are the smallest and least powerful of the families and Saldi's organization has been muscling in on all our enterprises. We want to regain what Saldi has taken from us. We want to prove that we can no longer be pushed around, that we should be treated with respect."

"What do the other families say," the man from Chicago asked. "It is important to know their true feelings in such matters."

"The other families do not object. To them, Saldi's organization has become too powerful and greedy. As for Saldi, they find him needlessly vicious, noisy, and quarrelsome. He gets mentioned in the papers too often and his heavyhanded ways bring the Feds down on all our necks. So, the other families want us to do the dirty work and get rid of him. If we succeed, everyone benefits. If we fail, just our family ends up on the chopping block. We agreed to this, but realized we were no match for Saldi and his gang. We need an equalizer." Kreski paused. "For this reason, we wish to hire the man you represent."

"\$100,000," the other man said succinctly.

"\$100,000," Kreski repeated in a choked voice. "That's impossible! You ask too much!"

"When you consider the advantages your family will gain and the risks my employer will have to take," the dapper man admonished, "it is indeed a bargain price. Take it or leave it. I'm not here to dicker. After all, you're the one with the problem." He stepped back as if to leave.

"All right, all right," Kreski said. "Don't get in a huff. I guess we can meet your price, even if it is a little steep. What are the terms of payment?"

"The usual. Half before the deed is done. Half immediately after. Total refund if the attempt fails."

"Haw! Fat chance of that," the New York gangster snorted. "Your guy never fails. And always the same way: point-blank range with a .22-caliber revolver and silencer. He must have iced a dozen guys all over the country that way," he said in awe.

Kreski bent down, picked up a small sea shell, and skimmed it far out into the sea. He shook his head in puzzlement and mused aloud, "What I would really like to know, what everyone would like to know, is how exactly does he do it? How does he get so close to them? Does he disguise himself as a mailman or a priest or a blind man or what? And why does he use a light weight gun like a .22? Why not use a gun with more stopping power?"

"I wish I could answer your questions," Pritkin said, smiling faintly, "but my employer keeps his techniques secret even from me. I confess, I too am intrigued at his uncanny ability to take his quarry unawares, even when they know he is coming after them. No combination of security measures and bodyguards has stopped him yet. Let us hope this holds true this time."

"So, we're all set then," Kreski said, his expression brightening. "He'll take Saldi out for us."

"Yes, he instructed me to accept the commission, if you would meet his price," Pritkin affirmed. "As soon as the first half of the funds are deposited in my client's account, he will put his plan into operation. Agreed? Good. It was a pleasure doing business with you. Oh, and by the way," he added as an afterthought, "you had better put some ointment on your nose, it appears to be sunburnt."

With that, the dapper man turned his back on Kreski and walked nonchalantly away.

IT WAS A MILD, UNSEASONABLY WARM APRIL DAY IN Chicago and, all through the park, small children laughed and played under the vigilant eyes of their doting mothers. Pritkin sat on a park bench, nervously drumming his fingers along the top of it. Even after five years of service, he always felt ill at ease when he was to meet with his deadly employer.

"Hello, Mr. Pritkin," a voice said with authority, causing him to turn about with a start.

"Hello, Mr. Decker," Pritkin said, briefly shaking hands. "How's the wife and kids?"

Decker sat down beside him and replied, "They're all fine. My eldest has been accepted for law school. That'll be one out of the nest, anyway. Only four more to go."

Pritkin found it incongruous that such a lethal assassin should also be an exemplary husband and father. But then, he reflected, everything about Decker was incongruous when measured against his violent profession. He was urbane, educated, scrupulously honest, and moral in the sense that he would only take commissions to eliminate organized crime figures and no one else. Not at all what one would expect a cold-blooded killer to be like. Still, time after time, Pritkin had picked up his morning paper to read that yet another gangster had been mysteriously cut down by a hail of .22 caliber bullets fired at close range. And that, he realized, was proof enough of Decker's deadly ability.

Taking a thick envelope from his inside coat pocket, Pritkin handed it to Decker. "Here's my report containing a breakdown of all the

restaurants, bars, business places, etcetera, that Saldi habitually frequents. Saldi tries, as much as possible, to maintain a random behavior pattern, although, because of the many legal and illegal operations he must attend to, this is not always possible. In general, however, he will be a difficult target to pin down.

"You will also find in my report," Pritkin continued, "that he is extremely cautious and well protected. He is always accompanied by his son, a bodyguard, and a driver. All three are armed, vigilant, and totally loyal. My judgement is that this will be the most difficult assignment you have ever taken on. If you need any additional services on my part, I will be glad to assist you."

"Thank you, Mr. Pritkin," Decker said politely. "I see you have done your usual thorough job. Your scouting reports and target evaluations always prove most valuable in assisting me to successfully complete my commissions."

Decker stood up and placed the envelope Pritkin had given him inside his suit pocket. "I will study your report most closely, Mr. Pritkin. I am sure it will give me the answer on how best to carry out my little task. If I have any questions, I know where to contact you," he said in farewell.

Decker turned on his heels and walked briskly away. Pritkin watched Decker as he headed out the park entrance. Despite the warmth of the day, he involuntarily shuddered. He knew that Saldi was as dead as if he were already in his coffin.

TWO WEEKS LATER, IN A QUIET, SLIGHTLY SEEDY BUSINESS district in New York City, a black limousine pulled up in front of a three-storied red brick building. A weather-worn sign in front proclaimed that the building housed the Saldi Import-Export Company. The driver got out, walked around the automobile, opened the rear passenger door, and stood there expectantly. Just then, a burly, tough-looking man came out of the building and looked warily up and down the street. Satisfied that all was safe, the second man turned around and said, "All right, Mr. Saldi, you can come out now."

Saldi, a short, squat, powerfully-built man, stepped out onto the sidewalk accompanied by his son. Precisely at that moment, a muffled, coughing sound repeated over and over again. All four men had looks of total, stunned surprise on their faces as they fell down before the blizzard of .22-caliber pistol fire that engulfed them . . .

DECKER SAT TENSELY IN HIS RENTED CAR, AROUND THE corner and about a block away from Saldi's business, and carefully

scanned both sides of the street. Traffic was sparse and the sidewalks were empty, except for a girl around seventeen and a boy about fifteen, each carrying a bag of groceries. Decker seemed to relax a bit. There were no sirens, no sense of alarm, and no need for a fast getaway. He started up the car and continued to monitor the light traffic that occasionally passed by, but nothing seemed amiss.

In a few minutes, the front passenger door and right rear door opened and closed quickly as the two teenagers got into the car. Without turning his head, Decker put the car into drive and pulled out into the street.

"How did it go?" Decker asked matter-of-factly as he drove down the road.

"Okay," the young girl seated next to him said. "We did like always. First we made sure no witnesses were around and then we went ahead and made the hit. We were practically on top of them when we pulled the revolvers out of the grocery bags. I got Saldi and his son. Jeffrey got the chauffeur and bodyguard."

"Fine. You two kids did well," Decker complimented. "I'm proud of both of you."

"Thanks, dad," both teenagers chimed in unison as the car sped off in the direction of the airport. ●

ROBERT CITTADINO (*Family Business*) says:

I have had two other stories published previously in EQMM. I am a recent graduate of Cal State, Los Angeles, majored in political science, and plan to pursue a career in government.

Thirty years after his disappearance, Uncle Ollie's body showed up, or what was left of it!

She Who Laughs Last

by CHARLES PETERSON

"WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH THIS OLD THING?" I ASKED, holding up a faded souvenir pillow.

Annie McEnery, her disheveled white hair giving her more than a passing resemblance to the White Queen of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, peered at me over her glasses and paused in the middle of sorting out items for her rummage sale. "Oh, dear!" she said, managing as usual to make it sound like an apology for some social gaffe. "I don't know. I was thinking of saving that for Conrad—you know, my cousin-by-marriage."

I knew Conrad—a pudgy middle-aged man who carefully combed his few remaining hairs across the top of his head, and whose smile seemed to me to owe more to some dental technician than to any innate geniality. Conrad had appeared on Annie's doorstep, claiming kinship, shortly after her name was in all the papers following the discovery of the body of Oliver Baldwin—Annie's Uncle Ollie.

Uncle Ollie was a small-town banker whose disappearance thirty-odd years before was a local sensation, particularly as it coincided with the disappearance of several thousand dollars from his bank account. It was assumed at the time that he was escaping from his wife, Myra,

mother of Conrad by a previous marriage, and when a rather perfunctory "missing person" search failed to find any trace of him, it was taken as evidence that he'd gotten away with it and that congratulations were in order. But just a month or so ago Oliver Baldwin's body—or what little was left of it—came to light in the erosion of a local trout stream by the spring floods. Reconstructing the event, the sheriff's office deduced that Uncle Ollie had been off on a solitary fishing trip and had been accidentally killed in the collapse of the riverbank. Of the missing money there was no trace, it having presumably rotted away over the years. So all Annie got out of it was some unwanted publicity and a re-acquaintance with an almost-forgotten cousin.

"Conrad has been quite attentive," Annie went on, setting a statue of a beagle firmly on the "To Sell" table. "I'm glad, because I always felt he resented Uncle Ollie being more generous with me than with his own stepson."

I gave the pillow a shake and was rewarded by a cloud of dust and the faint scent of dusty pine-needles. "And what does this mean?" I wondered, looking at the embroidered motto: "Should This Rip or Tear / Don't Mind it. / True Happiness Is Where / You Find It."

"I'm sure I don't know," said Annie, with a faint smile. "And I know you're wondering why I've hung on to that disreputable object. Well, it was Uncle Ollie's wedding gift to Jim and me."

"This?" I was thunderstruck. "A wedding gift?"

Annie laughed. "My sentiments exactly, when I opened the package. But it's just the sort of thing Uncle Ollie would do. For a joke, you see. I'm sure he intended to give us something more worthwhile—he was as generous as Myra was tight-fisted. But then he disappeared so mysteriously, and of course Myra latched on to everything and soon moved away. So instead of leaving that pillow in the trash where I'd thrown it, I brought it back in, and it's been in the attic all these years as a reminder of him. I feel guilty now that I misjudged him, but oh," she went on, her eyes looking back on the past, "he was a caution, Uncle Ollie was! You'd never imagine it of a banker who was supposed to be a pillar of the community! He'd sit there in his office, scowling at some poor young man who needed a few thousand dollars for his business, and just when the poor fellow thought all was lost, Uncle Ollie would chuckle and, like as not, offer him twice what he'd asked for."

I was not vastly amused. "I suppose that's all very well. But I've always suspected there was a kind of mean streak in most practical jokes. Keeping that young man on edge, for example. My experience

with jesters is that they seldom consider the consequences for someone who may not get the point. However," I tucked the pillow out of sight in the window seat, where we were keeping the "Not for Sale" things, "if you really think Conrad would be thrilled with it . . ."

"I'm sure he'd like it," said Annie, a bit defensively. "He laughed so when I told him about getting a pillow with a motto as a wedding present. Said that was Uncle Ollie all over. So I thought I'd surprise Conrad one of these days."

Just then there was a rat-a-tat-tat on the door knocker and Annie said, "There he is Now!"

Why Conrad should prefer whacking a door knocker when there was a perfectly good doorbell handy I don't know, but as Annie said, there he was. He swept off his hat, revealing a brow with a slight sheen of perspiration, and bowed in a courtly manner, putting a severe strain on his jacket buttons.

"Ah, dear Cousin Annie," he beamed. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop in to say hello."

"Nice to see you, Conrad," said Annie. "This is my friend and neighbor, Lucy Grayson."

Conrad pressed my hand moistly and uncorked a 25-watt smile. "Then Lucy Grayson is surely a friend of mine as well!" He eyed the quantity of rummage appraisingly. "I see you took my suggestion about getting rid of some of the things you no longer need."

"Oh, this was your idea?" I asked. "I wondered why Annie was so set on holding a sale, all of a sudden."

Annie fluttered her hands in a fit of embarrassment. "Yes, it was Conrad's idea. He didn't think I should be hanging onto things that reminded me of the past. And of course a bit of extra money always comes in handy."

Conrad clucked his tongue in a sympathetic manner. "Better all 'round that you get rid of those non-essentials."

Presently he took his leave, promising to stop by tomorrow in case we needed help with the sale. He would, he said, dearly love to take home something as a memento of dear old Uncle Ollie, if there happened to be a little something.

At which Annie nudged me and flashed a conspiratorial smile.

TRUE TO HIS WORD, CONRAD WAS ON HAND AS WE WERE setting things out on tables the following morning, and if he was of little help otherwise, he at least managed to fend off the dealers who always show up ahead of time at these affairs, seeking early-bird treasures—while he carefully examined our offerings himself. It was

while Annie was back in the house hunting up some more labels that Conrad pounced on something.

"Ah, I remember this!" he said, gazing fondly at a pillow embroidered with the words, "Bless This House." It seems, he explained to me, that dear Uncle Ollie used this very pillow for his naps in the parlor years ago, and it was just the memento he was hoping for. Annie had marked it at a dollar, but Conrad insisted on giving me two and left hurriedly, whispering that he didn't want dear Cousin Annie to think he was offering charity.

"Oh, dear!" was Annie's comment, when she returned. "That wasn't the pillow I wanted him to have. It's the one you put in the window seat." She went over and pulled it out. "I should have described it to him, I suppose. But perhaps he'll be back later."

"I'm sure of it," I said. "But before he returns, hand me that scissors, will you?"

"Lucy, what are you doing?" cried Annie in astonishment, as I ruthlessly cut into Uncle Ollie's wedding gift.

"'Should This Rip Or Tear, Don't Mind It,'" I quoted, and Annie's moans of dismay turned into a shriek as desiccated pine needles cascaded out. Along with a hundred-dollar bill. And another. And another. And another. "Happiness Is Where You Find It!" I concluded triumphantly.

THERE WERE A HUNDRED OF THEM BY THE TIME WE FINISHED counting—ten thousand dollars, altogether—and Annie was almost speechless. "But how—how did you know?" she managed, at last.

"Well, I always wondered why Conrad never sent you so much as a Christmas card before your uncle's body was found—with no trace of the money he was supposed to have made off with. I'm sure it was the first thing Conrad thought about when the body turned up, and he must have connected it up with your wedding present."

"Everyone wondered about that," said Annie. "Some people even thought it indicated that Uncle Ollie had lost his mind!"

"And of course it would never occur to a practical joker like your Uncle Ollie that you might be angry enough to throw the pillow away before he had a chance to reveal his little joke. But what really tipped me off," I said, "was all that nonsense Conrad was spouting about the 'pillow dear Uncle Ollie used to nap on.' He didn't know, you see, that it was the one you bought at *my* rummage sale two years ago!" ●

I realize it was only a dream. I feel humiliated. At the final hearing it would be Edward's word against mine. And Edward would win.

Part Of The Game

by AUDREY WENDLAND

IT WAS ALWAYS THE SAME DREAM.

I am seated in the judge's chamber at a long mahogany table, facing Edward and his attorney. The court reporter is poised over her machine. The atmosphere is tense. This is my last chance to prove that my husband has just committed perjury. When the pivotal question comes . . . as it always does . . . I am prepared.

"Where is the documentation. The promissory note you claim your husband wrote, Mrs. Barnes."

The attorney's face is bland and smug. Like all highly-paid lawyers, he knows that answer to the question before he asks. Edward is bland and smug. He knows the documentation—the evidence—no longer exists. Edward looks like the proverbial cat that swallowed the canary.

"Right here," I say in resonant tones. I see Edward turn pale and the muscles in his neck tighten. This is my grand moment. In my dream, the hearing has been a long and gruelling one, with each side hoping the other will become tired and cross. Our financial affairs are complex and hard to untangle after ten years of being in business together. But I am calm. I am pleased that Edward has just denied under oath, any knowledge of receiving a loan from me.

I reach into my monogrammed leather briefcase. In my dream, I always have a briefcase although I have never owned one. In my dream, I always describe the paper just before the pivotal question is asked. Now, at this moment of climax, I produce the long sheet of legal-size

yellow paper, the one with Edward's back-slanted handwriting on the blue lines. I read aloud:

"I, Edward Barnes, promise to pay on demand to my wife, Ellen Barnes, the sum of \$50,000 . . ."

Then I wake up. In the darkness of my bedroom, I realize it is only a dream. I feel humiliated. At the final hearing, it would merely be Edward's word against mine.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BRIEFCASE?" In the office of his counseling service, Dr. Farnsworth leaned forward in his chair, after listening to me recount the dream in every detail.

"I don't know, doctor." My nerves were raw from lack of sleep. I stared at this kindly, grey-haired psychologist, thinking perhaps I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Edward had the only other key to our safe deposit box," I continued. "He is the only one who could have destroyed that note."

"Perhaps you think you should have been more business-like. Or less trusting." Dr. Farnsworth took off his glasses and smiled the sort of smile reserved for women who make fools of themselves.

"Edward and I were newlyweds at the time I lent him the money. I wanted to help him out of debt. A small dress shop. It always was understood he would pay me back."

"And he never did," Dr. Farnsworth commented, making another note on his pad. "Even though he went on to establish a big chain of dress shops. Perhaps there is something in your subconscious that refuses to let Edward go. Even though you are the one who wants the divorce."

"Perhaps there is something in my subconscious that hates being cheated," I snapped back.

Total exhaustion was wearing me down. For six months, ever since my frantic discovery that the promissory note was missing, I'd had the same recurring dream. Always seated in the judge's chamber, next to Blake Marshall, my attorney.

"It's all part of the game," Blake had said after the preliminary hearing on temporary alimony, when I had felt shocked over the way Edward had tried to conceal his true income. "Everyone tells lies during a divorce settlement. It's the way of the world."

Again I focused my attention on Dr. Farnsworth. "I inherited the money from my father ten years ago," I explained. "Edward was struggling along as a bookkeeper at the time."

"That was in the past, Mrs. Barnes. Now you must think about

today and feel willing to change your life for the better." Dr. Farnsworth reached for his pad and made a few more notes.

That night, I had the same dream.

I am back in the judge's chamber, facing Edward. Only this time he has Dr. Farnsworth as a witness. He gives testimony about my revenge complex.

"The documentation, Mrs. Barnes." I reach for my briefcase . . . I wake up trembling.

"NOW MRS. BARNES, WE MUSTN'T GET PARANOID OVER this," the doctor remarked on my next visit. "It's not too unusual for me to appear in a client's dream. Your mind is trying to find an answer to your problem. The human mind has profound and untapped capabilities, Mrs. Barnes. But it's your emotions we must deal with now. You are very tense."

"I'm exhausted. I'm trying to run six stores all at once while Edward is juggling the books and trying to hold off the creditors."

"This is only situational, Mrs. Barnes. Please try to remember."

I stared at Dr. Farnsworth with my sleep-hazed eyes. He looked the same as all of them . . . like both the attorneys. Like Edward. Bland and smug. Pale, bespectacled, thinning hair, thoroughly in command. Steering me down a road of their choosing.

The nightly dream began to have more ramifications.

I experience an opening scene. There stands Edward, the long sheet of yellow paper in his hand, a winning smile on his then-handsome face. Like a camera, my view zooms in for a close-up as Edward writes the words.

"There you are, my darling," he says with a flourish. "You have it in writing. Now let's drink a toast to our future,"

The story unwinds. I see myself working at our small shop. I see Edward keeping the books, building his empire of mortgages. Then comes the scene when I catch Edward with one of the salesgirls. In a dressing room, of all places. And then the scene at the deposition when under the grilling of Edward's attorney, my heart beating wildly, I admit I cannot produce the promissory note.

WEEKS PASS. MORE SESSIONS WITH DR. FARNSWORTH. More meetings with Blake, my attorney. Night after night my sleep is interrupted, while by day I struggle to hold our collapsing chain of stores together.

"Forget about the loan," my attorney advised. "So Edward was an opportunist. That doesn't matter anymore. Forget about everything

except being calm and in control of yourself at the hearing. We finally have a date now. For court."

"What could happen if Edward trapped himself in perjury?"

"That obviously would influence the judge in your favor." Blake smiled.

Attorneys hate to make predictions. And how could I expect him to understand my feelings that horrible day at the bank. On an impulse, after the quarrel over the salesgirl, I had gone to inspect the contents of our safe deposit box. I learned Edward had visited the box the day before and had stripped it clean. Not an insurance policy was left, not a car title, not the deed to the house; and certainly not the promissory note that had been buried under all the other papers, the note he had written to me ten years before.

No. Blake couldn't understand. Dr. Farnsworth couldn't understand. My brain lurched with the horrid comprehension. I stood totally alone in my dilemma. Then, in a blinding flash of insight, the answer came. I knew what I had to do.

ON THE MORNING OF THE DIVORCE HEARING, I STUDIED myself in the mirror. I looked devastating. My eyes were clear and bright. I had slept through the night and all the nights since the moment of enlightenment. Dr. Farnsworth had been right. The human mind has profound capabilities. And now I realized the answer had been with me all along. I merely had been too wracked in the turbulence of my emotions to recognize the solution.

How kind all my mentors had been. Dr. Farnsworth. Relieving of all that anxiety. Blake. Instructing me on the rules of the game. And yes, even Edward. The opportunist. I had learned a great deal from Edward.

I turned from the mirror to pick up my briefcase. I had bought a beautiful leather one crested with my monogram. Simply touching it made me feel important and capable. I would have no problem in salvaging the business, once Edward was ousted.

I smiled. And checked the contents of the briefcase once more. All that remained was the timing. To wait for Edward's denial. Then give my exact description. Then wait for the pivotal question.

I had seen the vital paper so many times in my dream, Edward's back-slanted handwriting had been easy to duplicate. My heart beat at a steady, confident pace. This was going to be an excellent day. ●

He had waited years for this moment—this wonderful moment when he would balance the ledgers of life and death!

The Avenging of Jessica

by WILLIAM ALLEN HALL

THE WIND WAS DREADFULLY COLD BLOWING IN SHORT gusts with endless fury from the north. Even sitting in the confines of his automobile the man felt it seeping through the crevices of the doors and windows. He sat back in the seat and tried to stretch his aching legs while straining to see the doorway across the street. He knew that Dr. Abrahms would be inside comfortably seated in his study in front of the fireplace. He was probably having brandy while relaxing with his family, oblivious to the man outside, the man who waited to kill him.

In spite of the discomfort caused by the weather, the man was patient. After all, he had been waiting almost forty years to kill Dr. Abrahms, and another few hours in the cold darkness wouldn't make much difference.

With one gnarled hand he reached inside the breast pocket of his well-worn overcoat and removed a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He held a match in his other hand and deftly struck it on the thumbnail. It suddenly blazed into life and while touching it to the end of his cigarette his eyes fell on the revolver in the seat beside him. He lowered the window only slightly to toss the matchstick outside, then slowly pulled the gun into his lap. He sat very still while massaging the smooth shiny pearl of its handle. The muzzle was also smooth and somewhat oily as

he had taken special care to clean it while he waited during the afternoon hours. Inside the chambers were six .38 caliber bullets. He lay his head back against the seat of the car and closed his eyes and thought about those bullets and what they would do to Dr. Abrahms. He could imagine himself standing before the doctor and bringing the gun up, watching the dawning fear in the doctor's eyes as he suddenly knew that the man was there to kill him, just as the good doctor had killed Jessica so many years before.

THE THOUGHT OF HIS WIFE JESSICA WARMED HIM INSIDE as though the wintry night had unexpectedly been transformed into summer. He could see her before him even now as though he were staring at a photograph, the long flow of her auburn hair surrounded the perfect roundness of her face aglow with the radiance of youth. He could feel her touch, hear the quick laughter that had filled their lives so long ago. The years had done nothing to erase the love he had felt for her. In past times the remembrance would have brought tears to his eyes, but no more. Now he was only empty.

He was brought to attention as a glimmer passed across his eyes. He blinked and noticed that a light had been turned on, flooding the entrance way of the doctor's home. The garage door silently slid upward, and a dark shape backed out over the smooth concrete driveway. The brake lights momentarily blinded him, and then the car made its way along the street toward the business section of town. The man hurriedly fumbled for the key ring in the ignition and after two false starts the engine reluctantly sputtered to life. He moved into the dark street and followed at a discreet distance.

He noticed that the car he followed was a new, expensive model, and this in itself served to fill him with rage. He knew that the doctor was very successful not only in material wealth but in every facet of his life. He had a beautiful wife as well as two young healthy sons. Back in his tiny house the man had a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings citing the doctor's many accomplishments in civic organizations around the community. It was a good life full of the blessings and riches that he and Jessica had never shared together. It was a life that would soon be ended.

A SHORT TIME LATER THE BLACK CAR SLOWED BEFORE pulling into a small shopping mall off the main street and settled into a parking space in front of a sporting goods store. The man noted with satisfaction that the doctor was alone. He parked his own car a few spaces behind and watched while the doctor carefully locked his door

before pulling his coat tightly around himself and hurrying in out of the wind.

The man sat in silence, not moving. He knew with point blank certainty that the wait was over. The ledgers of life and death would at last be balanced and his mind would be at peace. The thought gave way to movement as he climbed from his car and made his way toward the well-lighted store front. Looking neither left nor right, he strode in a steady determined manner toward the entrance to the store.

Both the owner and the doctor who were standing at the counter turned toward the sound of the approaching customer. The man stood like a statue silhouetted in the doorway. In a hoarse demanding voice he called the doctor by name and with one sweeping motion pulled the revolver from his overcoat and fired until the gun was empty.

TWO HOURS LATER THE MAN SAT ERECT AND STILL across from the desk occupied by Lieutenant Wendall Nelson of the Lewisburg Police Department. His hands were cuffed and clasped tightly in front of him while his eyes were steady and unblinking. The lieutenant, after reading the arrest report, had had the man brought from his cell upstairs down to his office. He now sat and viewed the old man with a mixture of hatred and disgust, but also there was fear. In his fourteen years on the police force he had been involved in at least a hundred homicides, yet he was still appalled at how men could kill with such ease and lack of conscience. Murder always left him with a sense of emptiness and a fear that could never be completely pushed aside. The lieutenant leaned across the desk top. His own eyes met the sightless gaze of the man across from him. When he opened his mouth to speak, his voice was cold and toneless.

"We know your name is Jacob Hollis and that you are a retired Army officer. We found out that much from your car registration. By morning we will have a complete record on you from the F.B.I. office in Washington. In a half hour or so someone from the prosecuting attorney's office will be here to take you downtown and file formal charges against you for first degree murder." He paused to study the man who seemed not to hear. "Dr. Abrahms was a close personal friend of mine, and before you leave this room tonight I want to know why, Mr. Hollis." A tinge of emotion came to his voice. "I'm sure some smart mouth lawyer will have a nice pat insanity plea all worked up for you, but if we have to sit here until doomsday I want to know why!"

Outwardly the old man lost some of his composure, seeming to tremble from deep within. His breathing was ragged and his voice deep

and broken.

"Very well, sir. I suppose it doesn't matter, now that justice has been done." He took a long, deep breath as though to collect himself. "In 1940 I was married to Jessica Dodson. She was the most all-consuming part of my life, lieutenant, the one and only thing that I have ever loved. Two years later while she was with child I was inducted into the Army and sent to Europe. I was captured by the Germans and presumed dead until my release by the Allied Forces in 1945. On my return to America I searched for my Jessica. I learned she had given birth to a child in an Army hospital outside of Washington and several hours later had died. With my Jessica gone and myself presumed dead the baby had been given up for adoption. That man, your friend Dr. Abrahms, was responsible, lieutenant. He brought death to my Jessica and in doing so destroyed my own life. My only thought, the one burning obsession that has haunted me all these years, was to bring vengeance against the man who had taken away my Jessica."

Lieutenant Nelson stood up from his chair so violently that it turned over and crashed behind him on the tile floor.

"But that's impossible, Hollis, don't you see! Bob Abrahms was barely forty years old. He couldn't have possibly been the doctor responsible for your wife's death."

Jacob Hollis turned cold empty eyes on the policeman. "Lieutenant Nelson, my Jessica died in pain and anguish while giving birth to our child. Doctor Bob Abrahms was my son!" ●

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

What famous champion of justice did Butch Cavendish ambush?

The leader of the Hole-in-the-Wall gang ambushed and almost killed the man who was to become The Lone Ranger.

What is the name of Travis McGee's houseboat?

John D. MacDonald's private eye lives on *The Busted Flush*.

Mike Shayne Mystery Makers

BRUCE E. CEASAR (*The House That Walt Built*) says:

Born Lansing, MI, March 30, 1954. Brought up in St. Johns. 1976 moved to Hollywood, CA with co-writer, C.A. Renton, pursuing a songwriting career. 1978 won honorable mention award in American Song Festival. 1979 wrote original score for USC film *Rooster*. Married Deborah J. Schneider 1979. By 1980, songwriting team had split up, but through the influence of my co-writer, also a fiction writer, my interest in the written word was kindled. 1982 enrolled for one semester of short story writing at Pasadena City College under the direction of author Kay Haugaard. 1983 sold my first story "Second-Hand Smoke" to science fiction periodical Analog. Today, working on mystery novel *Dancing the West Side Shuffle*.

JEFFREY J. McGRAW (*Ross Malone: Next of Kin*) tells us:

I am thirty-one years old and have been writing off and on for the last twelve years. Seriously for the past seven. I began writing detective and mystery fiction after reading all twenty Travis McGee adventures and being captivated by the style of the author and the uniqueness of the character. Previously I had been writing and selling comedy material. Some jokes were purchased by Phyllis Diller. I even performed my own material for a few hectic weeks. I am married with a four-year-old son and a wife who has been more than supportive in my writing over the long years. I don't really believe in reincarnation, but if I did I'd want to come back as Travis McGee or Parker's Spenser.

CECILY S. NABORS (*A Classic Crime*) writes:

Though I've been reading mysteries all my life and have a large collection of them, this is my first attempt to write an adult mystery story. My previously-published stories have all been for children. "A Classic Crime" was written as a response to a "bet-you-can't" challenge from a writer friend who proposed St. Clair's awful position and dared me to take it from there. I am a mathematician and leader of a programming section for Vitro Corporation, a military contractor. I'm the mother of two sons, one in college and one in graduate school.

HEROES AND VILLAINS

Literature has brought us many famous and infamous antagonists.
Match the good guys in the left column with their foes on the right.

1. Sherlock Holmes
2. Mickey Mouse
3. Superman
4. Captain Ahab
5. Sam Spade
6. Flash Gordon
7. Dorothy
8. Captain America
9. Ulysses
10. Batman
11. Jean Valjean
12. Buck Rogers
13. Captain Marvel
14. James Bond
15. Popeye
16. Ben-Hur
17. Offissa Pup
18. Robin Hood
19. Beowulf
20. Terry Lee

- A. Kasper Gutman
- B. Ignatz Mouse
- C. Messala
- D. The Wicked Witch
- E. The Dragon Lady
- F. The Cyclops
- G. Grendel
- H. Killer Kane
- I. Javert
- J. The Sheriff of Nottingham
- K. Peg-Leg Pete
- L. Lex Luthor
- M. Ming the Merciless
- N. The Red Skull
- O. Moby Dick
- P. Ernst Stavro Blofeld
- Q. Bluto
- R. The Joker
- S. Professor Moriarty
- T. Thaddeus Bodog Sivanna

ANSWERS

I1—I2—H13—T14—P15—Q16—C17—B18—J19—G20—E
I—S2—K3—L4—O5—A6—M7—D8—N9—F10—R

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

Anyone who thinks (if anyone does) that the mystery/suspense genre is waning should see the flood of fine new books that are being offered, with more on the way. Here are reports on some of them:

A remarkably good book is *A Death in China* by William D. Montalbano and Carl Hiaasen, their third book together. The senior author spent several years as a bureau chief in Peking where much of the action is laid. The atmosphere of this remarkable city, its administration by the present government, and its people are all vividly portrayed with sometimes frightening authenticity. The book covers a wide sweep through China, Hong Kong and eventually Washington, D.C. Its intensity never falters as intrigue, greed, smuggling, murder, and above all politics interweave in this fascinating work. What the British call a thriller emerges here as literature. (Atheneum, \$14.95)

★ ★ ★

A Novena for Murder is an inviting first novel that features the detective abilities of Sister Mary Helen, 75, to whom the idea of retirement is ridiculous. The author is Sister Carol Anne O'Marie, a nun for thirty years, despite her youthful appearance. Sister O'Marie

has plunged into the genre with six lovely murders, two police inspectors (one male and one female) who live together, and a brisk new detective. The book is a success, not because a nun wrote it, but because she did a fine job despite her admitted need for guidance in the (not too) sexy parts. (Scribners, \$12.95)

★ ★ ★

The Scribner 1983 Crime Novel Award was won by Ted Wood with *Dead in the Water*, a story about the one-man, one-dog police department in Murphy's Harbour, Ontario. It was a dandy. Now former policeman Wood is back with the same cast and another superbly told story, *Murder on Ice*. If you haven't yet met Chief Reid Bennett and the rest of the force, whose name is Sam, don't wait any longer. Ted Wood is a brilliant new talent on the scene. (Scribners, \$12.95)

★ ★ ★

When Ellis Peters introduced her medieval monk-detective, Brother Cadfael, in *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, she hit a winning number. There are now eight books about the good brother and the Benedictine House of St. Peter and St. Paul in Shrewsbury. The newest addition is *The Devil's Novice*, a work with a fairly transparent plot, but rich with the color of England in the 12th Century. The first title is still especially recommended; after that most readers will be hooked on this interesting departure in the literature. (Morrow, \$13.95)

★ ★ ★

Ib Melchior is building a solid reputation in the espionage field. His new book, called *Eva*, introduces the startling idea that Eva Braun, Hitler's mistress and wife during his last hours, was pregnant at the time of her supposed death. Rather than let her die, an elaborate plan is formulated to get her out of Berlin and to Argentina to bear Der Führer's son. The details of the plot are told in harrowing detail. Tales of the last days of Nazi Germany abound, but if you can stand war-ravaged Berlin one more time, this is a gripping page turner. (Dodd Mead, \$15.95)

★ ★ ★

A genuine Soviet police procedural is *Losing Bet* by Mikhail Chernyonok, a novelist who lives, presumably by choice, in Siberia. It gives an interesting, and at times fascinating, look at Soviet police

investigation (not the KGB), but the western reader will probably have some problems with the many intricate Russian names that are hard to sort out. This, of course, is our fault, not the author's. The patient reader who will take the time to keep track of who's who will find this an unusually interesting work. (The Dial Press, \$14.95)

★ ★ ★

The people who write the stickier kinds of romances get a good going over by Elizabeth Peters in her new book *Die For Love*. A convention of romance writers is being held in New York, largely under the control of a rapacious agent who comes across in vivid style. There is murder done; the detective is a middle-aged lady librarian almost as aggressive as the agent herself. This is written for a largely female audience, but it is quite an eye opener for anyone concerned with historical romantic fiction. (Congdon & Weed, \$14.95)

★ ★ ★

A Spy in Winter takes us back to the dark world of espionage at the time of Kim Philby and provides a fictional look at the still unknown (at least publicly) man who ran him and the other British traitors. The author is given as Michael Hastings, but after a few pages the expert hand of Michael Bar-Zohar was evident. The man who organized the famous spy ring, and who has admitted it, is lured back to England to appear on TV and tell his story (for a substantial consideration). The questions are penetrating and old wounds are quickly reopened. This is a spy adventure solidly built on known fact, which gives it a special feeling of authenticity. The author most definitely knows his business. (MacMillan, \$14.95)

★ ★ ★

If you are looking for a one-evening read for entertainment, Ricky Perry, an established pro, offers *MacAllister*. The scene is largely Portugal, where a London private eye goes to investigate the murder of his one time comrade in arms and relative by marriage. High society plays an important role as MacAllister carries on his investigation and turns up much more than murder. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)

★ ★ ★

Martha Grimes' new book is called *The Dirty Duck*, the informal name of a pub in Shakespeare's Stratford. Most of the action takes place in this historical tourist trap where fine performances are

intermingled with the usual come-ons. A group of touring Americans, who might better be kept in cages, is undergoing steady homicides with clues of classic verse thoughtfully left with each cadaver. Well and wryly written, the book brings back Detective Superintendent Richard Jury to solve the case. If British traditional mysteries are your thing, here is this month's entry. (Little Brown, \$14.95)

★ ★ ★

PAPERBACK NOTES: Penguin is continuing to offer reprints of both recent and older mystery classics, among them *Seven Suspects* by the prolific Michael Innes, *The Players and the Game*, by Grand Master Julian Symons, the well-known *Blood Upon the Snow* by Hilda Lawrence, *The Avenging Angel* by Rex Burns, and something different, *The Shadow of the Moth*, an espionage tale with Virginia Woolf authored by Ellen Hawkes and Peter Manso . . . Bantam is also in there pitching with the classic *Flowers for the Judge* by Margery Allingham, Ross MacDonald's *Meet Me at the Morgue*, and the Orient-based *Giri* by Marc Olden. Much of the action is in New York and other western cities, but the culture of Japan overrides everything else . . . The excellent Walker British Mystery series continues with the addition of *No Face in the Mirror* by Hugh McLeave and *Gone to Her Death* by Pierre Audemars . . . Avon offers *Sick of Shadows* by Sharyn McCrumb, a debut novel built on the eccentric family theme that has been praised by no less than Dorothy Salisbury Davis. Also from Avon is a paperback reprint of *When the Dark Man Calls* by established pro Stuart M. Kaminsky . . . Academy Chicago keeps coming up with reprints by the very talented Leo Bruce. The latest addition is *Death at St. Aprey's School* in which Carolus Deene goes into action once again . . . Dell offers another of the fine Robert Barnard mysteries, this one is *The Case of the Missing Bronte* . . . Avon is also presenting front-line material. The latest additions are *Special Circumstances* by Brian Lysaght and two of Donald Westlake's fine Richard Stark novels, *The Mourner* and *The Outfit*, both very much worth reading . . . Terror is highly popular right now; Pocket Books offers plenty of it in the paperback reprint of Whitley Strieber's *Night Church* wherein unholy doings are as gruesome as could be desired.

●

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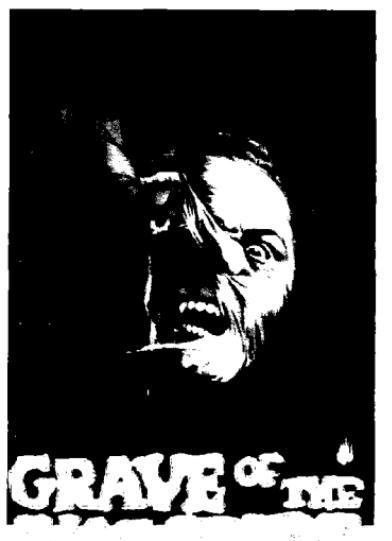
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